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The purpose of this work is to engage with the proliferation of the myth of Marie Laveau, the nineteenth-century Voodoo figure of New Orleans, Louisiana and its multiple potentialities as both a tool of investment in whiteness as a form of intellectual property as well as a subject for myth as uplift, refusal, and resistance in terms of southern black womanhood and the critically imaginary. In this work, I create a trajectory of work that has endeavored to “recover” Laveau within institutionalized forms of knowing, specifically taking to task projects of recovery that attempt to present Laveau as a figure of strong leadership for women through institutionalized spaces and forms of knowledge, such as the archive while simultaneously dismissing other, “nonacademic” proliferations of the Laveau myth. This thesis serves to decenter the research, reading, and writing of the Laveau mythology as within the academy, which ostensibly serves white and normative generated and centered ways of knowing, identifying, and articulating, in favor of a methodology that accounts for cultural forms of mythologies that center memory, lineage, and communal identification. Through this critical work, I hope to supply a critical imaginary of what a Creole/Cajun southern feminism would look like, and how it is deeply intertwined with gendered and racialized nuances that are specific to region and community.

LOOKING FOR LAVEAU: THE MYTHOLOGY OF MARIE LAVEAU IN AND OUT  
OF THE ARCHIVE

by

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Approved by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I  
WHITENESS, FEAR, AND FETISHIZATION

Myth, of course, plays a very important part in all of our lives. Without myth and tradition, what is there?

*Julie Dash*

When I initially recognized Laveau, it was through a nonacademic medium. I had seen her before at some time, the tignon and gold hoop earrings used to market everything from hair care products and hot sauce to tarot cards and mixtures of essential oils that guaranteed love returned. Even as I began this research project, Marie Laveau's image graced the screen in the 2017 Southern Comfort Whiskey commercial, hips swaying to the drums and a large snake draped around her shoulders ("Southern Comfort Whiskey: The Spirit of New Orleans"). There are always drums and her hips always sway. Aside from gimmicks advertising goods and services, Laveau appears in television, films, plays, and even gets called to or out in a number of songs that vary widely in genre from Jazz to Swedish Death Metal. Various online stores advertise prayer candles for twenty dollars or full portraits for six hundred dollars, all featuring her image. The third season of the popular horror television show *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), features a protagonist group of primarily white witches, and as such the series places predominant focus on Eurocentric narratives of magic or otherwise deemed 'supernatural' phenomenon. Yet, due to the spatial setting in a city well known for other forms and articulations of magic and supernaturality (New Orleans, Louisiana), Voodoo

serves on the sideline to propel *Coven*'s larger plot. Drawing upon social lore, Voodoo comes to us in the name and figuration of Marie Laveau, played by Angela Bassett, the sole black actor in the *AHS* cast with a recurring appearance in more than two seasons (in Bassett's case, it has been four so far). The first scene in *Coven* that introduces us to Laveau utilizes those same identifying markers I mentioned above, down to the drums accompanying her steps as she approaches Delphine LaLaurie's gate to offer her services. The remark Laveau makes to Delphine LaLaurie indicates the double promise/threat that drives the mass proliferation of her figuration into this day: "I have heard you are in need of my services" (*Coven*: "Boy Parts"). It is Laveau's positioning, not simply *to offer* services, but *to serve*, that speaks to this multi-potentiality of her figuration; her inhabitation or forced inhabitation of spaces.

It is this notion of duality, of multiplicity that I interrogate in this work; the idea of a threat and a promise existing within the figure of Marie Laveau that I am most concerned with. For in this same scene where Marie Laveau appears to Madame LaLaurie, there is a moment of double-recognition: when LaLaurie recognizes her as *the* Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen with the secret spells and elixirs, she sees a promise to end her life troubles; when LaLaurie recognizes she is *the* Marie Laveau, a black woman with vengeance, she sees a threat to end her life. This anxiety-ridden response to Laveau is not altogether uncommon in spaces like my childhood home of Orange, Texas, a small town influenced by Cajun and Creole culture. Within hegemonically white spaces, the refusal to speak of Marie Laveau and Voodoo lingers, and when

brought up is often quickly followed with a claim that *they don't mess with that stuff*.

Within these circles, if you risk naming Laveau or Voodoo you risk calling a black woman into existence or into power.

The reasoning for my focus on specifically Cajun and Creole racialized and gender structures stems from my own positionality as a white Creole-born, Cajun-raised nonbinary southern feminist scholar. As such, I have worked to find a way to reconcile the rift between these identities. Through an academic journey to specify more closely in feminist rhetoric, I have pushed myself to imagine what a southern, Creole/Cajun, feminist praxis would look like. Race and racialized discourse have figured heavily in what it means to be southern to me, and more specifically what it means to be Creole and/or Cajun. Syncretism of not simply religion or culture, but also language—again here not simply the formation of distinct dialects but also a syncretism of ways of talking about race, heritage, and being—has been an overarching theme in my personal experience as well as my research. Overall, it is the orality of the culture, the way in which we pass down stories and meanings to each other that is the most prevalent. Myth itself is foremost an oral phenomenon, and the manners in which we engage with those oralities of knowledge deeply affect larger societal matrices of power. The history of New Orleans is storied and dynamic. Specifically, race legislation in New Orleans differs in its approaches to regulating blackness, having been under French, then Spanish, then finally American rule. This, along with the distinct situation of the racial and class distribution—there were a significantly higher number of free and enslaved people of color than whites—created a sort of caste system specific to New Orleans, the effects



of which are still present in the current time. Though I am not from New Orleans myself, I still have been subjected to these effects, either as a beneficiary or as an active participant. Because of such, I find that it is in my power and necessary duty to do the anti-racist work that this thesis is geared toward. Marie Laveau is my point of entry into this project. Growing up in white spaces of Creole and Cajun culture, there has been either a resounding mutability or an invocation of fear when it comes to naming Laveau. However, the high proliferation of her name and figure into pop culture media, literature, and some scholarship showed to me a duality of talking and writing about Laveau. Laveau is the most well-known historical “matriarch” of Louisiana Voodoo, so well-known that this proliferation of her image and name has taken place for over a century now. Why Marie Laveau? *It’s always been Marie Laveau.*

My project takes to task the notion of recovering Laveau within academia, an institution that has necessarily developed in opposition to, in a necessary forgetting of, southern black women like Laveau. Further, I challenge the methods of recovering Laveau along the strict framework of academia because of the presupposition of Laveau as already always lost. To ‘recover’ Laveau, there is an assumption that she *needs to be recovered*, which begs the larger question of a recovery to *who* and *for what purposes*? As such, I argue that to adequately understand and read Laveau, we must do so through myth to garner not just how she has certainly not been lost, but also to grasp those exercises of what I call whiteness as an investment in intellectual property that render her simultaneously invisible and hypervisible. Myth holds multi-

potentialities: reading Laveau as myth handles the historicizing process of recovery as active, constantly proliferating. It also points to different ways of researching and writing Laveau: one that accounts for how she has been recorded and studied within institutionalized forms of knowing that render her as illegible and incomplete, and another more radical form of oppositional gazing that renders her as a point of memory, resistance, and refusal. As such, I aim to decenter Laveau as a point of recovery within the academy to a point of *already existing* within what are categorized as ‘nonacademic’ sources.

Laveau positioned as threat has larger implications than hushed whispers: it reveals to us what Cheryl I. Harris articulates as a property interest in whiteness. Here, I do not mean literal whiteness, but the concept of an investment in a whiteness that is aligned with morality through racial, gender, and class matrices of power. Further, these powers are reigned by spatiotemporal contingencies that necessitate that “threat” and “promise” are enunciated within regional and cultural contextualities. In other words, Laveau as threat can only be articulated after already being filtered through Cajun and Creole notions of race, gender, and class. The figure of Marie Laveau (as opposed to the literal Marie Laveau), in her double-potential state as both a promise and a threat, acts in relation to white bodies. Further, most importantly, as threat Marie Laveau acts to serve white bodies.

### **Marie the Myth, Laveau the Legend:**

Marie Laveau (1801-1881) was a living person. She lived in New Orleans, worked as a nurse and hairdresser (though many disagree on her true profession—a running theme in recovery work on her), and was married twice. She was a free black woman, illiterate, a member of the Catholic church, and known for her visits to Parish Prison to pray with the inmates on death row. On her death, Brenda Marie Osbey comments, “You can go to the City Archives and read her death certificate and learn that she dies of diarrhea. Not even dysentery. Just plain diarrhea. Not an uncommon occurrence for someone living to an advanced age in those days” (Osbey 5). This is most, if not all, of the evidenced knowledge we have on Laveau. If this is so, why does Laveau’s image proliferate to this day on screen (*American Horror Story: Coven* (2013), *The Skeleton Key* (2005)), on stage (*Marie Christine* (Chicago, 2017)), and in various scholarship (Ward (2004), Fandrich (2005), Long (2006))?

In this thesis, I will interrogate how, through myth, the figure of Marie Laveau acts in relation to white bodies while also holds potential to act as a form of resistance, uplift, and identification. Within the past few decades there have been attempts by scholars to recover Laveau while negotiating these copious rumors and creative renderings of her in order to stake claim on her as a meaningful historical figure deserving of attention. To scholars such as Ina J. Fandrich and Carolyn Morrow Long, attention to Laveau should not be placed on works belonging to the genre of fiction or otherwise artistic interpretations of Laveau but more so on those sources of knowledge

generated by the institution. These attempts at recoveries instead center the archive as a type of authority in their work, subscribing to Western, Eurocentric notions of truth and factuality that are necessarily placed in opposition to situational methods of knowing and remembering that frame truth as subjective and less static. By working within these institutions, Long, Fandrich, and to some extent even Martha Ward hope to somehow legitimize Marie Laveau's relevance to scholarly discourse. I aim to trouble this approach by underlining how ascribing to institutionalized forms of knowing, writing, and researching, these authors replicate the very matrices of power that render Laveau illegitimate in the first place. I utilize a feminist methodological approach in this project. By this I do not mean that I argue that Marie Laveau was feminist or is a feminist figure. Rather, by orienting my project through a feminist lens I endeavor to provoke a discussion about gendered and racialized forms of knowing and remembering that have affected our engagement with mythology and its potentialities.

In their writing on recovery, (re)inscription, and rescue, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gena E. Kirsch reinforce the notion of recovery being purely for the sake of and more legible through academia. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* (2012), these scholars also underline certain considerations that can subvert this institutionalization of recovery work: "I realized that when we study women who are no longer alive, who can no longer speak back, explain, or set the record straight, questions of ethics and representation take on an increased urgency" (Royster and Kirsch 7). Recognizing this

tension in recovery work and realizing that many scholars who work on Laveau draw on ‘nonacademic’ and/or ‘noncredible’ sources for research yet simultaneously dismiss them, I am motivated by the following questions: (1) What are the stakes of recovering Marie Laveau (a free woman of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans, most associated with practices and beliefs widely positioned in opposition to academia) within academic discourse?; (2) Further, what constitutes academic modes of knowing, and to whom is the academic positioned to serve?; (3) How might work that serves to render Laveau legible within the institutional realm moreover actually dismiss or erase *living* black women?; and (4) What happens when we use non-normative methods of knowing, remembering, listening, and looking to read Marie Laveau in a critical context of possibility?

In *Black Looks*, hooks complicates the strict polarizing of imagery as good or bad, noting that those images, as I have described above, have not been generated by solely white (and/or male) creators, but also in the work of black (and/or women) inventors as well. She furthers that we must get away from simply reapplying socially embedded ideals such as “us/them,” “insider/outsider,” or hooks’ own concern, “good/bad.” Hooks writes,

The issue is really one of standpoint. From what political perspectives do we dream, look, create, and take action? [...] It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, and asking ourselves questions about what types of imagery subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad (Hooks 4).

Hooks' main concern is finding new ways to look at blackness, black subjectivity, and whiteness, arguing that the imagery affects not only how non-black people see blackness, but how black people see themselves. Though hooks addresses a primarily black scholarly and activist audience, I argue that these methods and questions are also useful for white allies to decolonize our own perceptions and work to better destabilize the power systems which we have been complicit in and have profited from. Hooks does not disregard the work of white allies in the process of looking and generating imagery. She stresses that if non-black people who write about or otherwise represent black people do not critically interrogate our own perspectives then we will always return to promoting the imperial gaze.

My emphasis on tracing the ever-proliferating mythology of Marie Laveau in relation to Hurricane Katrina and modes of (Creole) southern black feminist resistance is in order to underscore that same simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility that generate an inheritance of violence. As bell hooks argues in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, the representations of black women we are largely exposed to are more likely than not to re-inscribe white supremacy. Moreover, the image of a contemporary southern black woman is rare, with a majority of narrative projects with black women in the south lingering in settings prior to 1964. Trauma and violence of the past have not only become the sole legible method for defining black women figures' and characters' lives but also for defining trauma and violence themselves. Southern black women as well as the multiple issues they face are both rendered invisible through their positioning

in the past. At the same time, as signifiers of the past, as translated as the ‘primitive’ threat on the margins, southern black women are also rendered hyper-visible. Marie Laveau concurrently exists within material and mythic realities, as a historical figure whose uptake has been widespread in terms of the spatial, temporal, and genre. As such, Laveau and her trajectory reveal how violence has manifested, repeated, and transformed through myth generated by white supremacy. Rendered invisible in the academy through historiographic practices and hyper-visible by fear-and-fetish-induced exoticization, studying Laveau also illuminates how mythologies function beyond the past to dictate present dialogue as well as to prescribe or deny futures.

Representation of black women in relation to whiteness is particularly salient to the discussion of my using an explicitly feminist framework. The concept of whiteness as an intellectual form of property and hooks’ critique of white feminism shows how. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984, 2014), hooks criticizes white feminism as needing a “theory to “inform them that they were repressed”” while simultaneously dismissing black women’s experience-informed knowledge of the patriarchy (hooks 11). In terms of recovery work on Laveau, the drive to render Laveau as legitimate through academia as by Fandrich, Long, and Ward necessarily dismisses those black creatives who have *already recovered* Laveau as an important figure for remembering, resisting, and existing. In a dialogue with Julie Dash, director of *Daughters of the Dust*, hooks is concerned with the self-denial brought on by white supremacy, which works simultaneously to value whiteness while devaluing blackness (hooks and Dash 12). This

self-denial takes many forms, but in particular, hooks and Dash meditate on the drive to *forget* blackness. As loving blackness works as refusing and destroying white supremacy, white supremacy works to refuse and *refute* blackness. We can find this refutation and what it looks like in those projects such as translation, classification, and fetishization, which all work to articulate Laveau and blackness within white supremacy. In those spaces where Laveau is classified as mythology, folktale, gossip, fairy tale, etc., we find a fictionalization of not only a woman of color whose existence was influential enough to leave behind such a “fictional” legacy, but we find the fictionalization and refutation of an entire religion identified by that signifier of blackness. As Baeten has posited in *Myth's Abiding Power*, myth is seen as an interest of ethnography, associated with a practice of looking, observing, gawking at a distance. Specifically, myth and ethnography are believed as interested or concerned with the primitive, something ancient and, because of that temporality of knowledge, marked as ignorant or savage. When we talk mythology, or when something is relegated as myth, it is also deemed illegitimate knowledge. Because myth is understood as knowledge generated by and for primitivity, that consignment process which takes hold of it can easily place it in the fictional realm of knowledge, a marking of some anti-Truth. Myth, when understood as a collective thought and memory that exists necessarily against whiteness (due almost entirely to whiteness and white supremacy's refutation and refusal of blackness), becomes a dangerous and awesome space and framework within which to meditate. Understanding myth as that memory and knowledge passed and collected (later we will



talk specifically about that such myth in the Afro-Creole matriarchal lineage of knowledge, memory, and power), we can see how hooks' and Dash's push to return to that sacred memory of myth is a method of loving blackness, or even loving black womanhood: "So I learned that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and to move forward in the future" (Dash 30). Dash reiterates Paula Gunn Allen's myth as an "affirmation of the self that transcends the temporal" (Allen 116). Here, myth is localized as a space for establishing personhood and agency, most significantly in the context of black women.

I argue that instead of reading and/or recovering Marie Laveau through a lens that solely presents her as a historically recovered figure, we should rather understand Laveau as myth and expend critical attention to non-normative, nonacademic representative works. Within my argument, three related assertions highlight how myth and mythology as a framework operate to advance recovery work, particularly when writing on figures like Laveau. First, reading Laveau as myth offers an understanding of how whiteness has been driven through and by myth while simultaneously dismissing other forms of cultural myth. The second assertion is that, as a kind of remembering, revision, and recovery, these other forms of cultural myth work through spatiotemporal, racial, and gendered contingencies. And finally, the third assertion is that these other forms of cultural myth already exist in their work on Laveau, despite their relegation as non-scholarly, they are nonetheless rooted in critical imagination that are much more useful to real world implications of this dichotomy of types of knowing, such as the

lineage of legal trajectories criminalizing black women in Louisiana, from tignon laws to the Crimes Against Nature by Solicitation litigation of 2011.

### **Myth as Recovery, Resistance, and Existence:**

Recovery of Marie Laveau operates on much richer levels when approached through a mythological framework as it provides resistance within existence. Scholars Roland Barthes, Elizabeth M. Baeten, and Paula Gunn Allen are useful in mapping out the various functions and implications of myth. Specifically, Barthes' and Baeten's theorization of myth helps to underscore the function of a certain myth as driven by and for whiteness. In contrast, Allen highlights the potentiality of those forms of cultural myth as a form of resistance entrenched in hopefulness. There is a formal, 'intellectual' treatment of myth, where the investigator of these phenomena gains the position of the mythologist. As Elizabeth M. Baeten argues, there are very few straightforward or strict definitions of myth put forth by mythologists, illustrating that myth's dominant descriptions lie in two strains: structural and functional. The structural strain concerns itself with form, content, function, and context. Unlike the latter strain, this function in structural definition is fixed in its underlying meaning or narrative. Here, myth is understood as passive. This creates static spatial and temporal contexts, continuously relegating the mythical subject to the past. Baeten critiques this as delineating "myth' as applicable only to cultural traits or forms not closely related to the traits and forms of modern technologically oriented, western Judeo-Christian societies" (Baeten 28). On the other hand, the functional descriptions of myth rely on

elaborating on how they work and what that work does. Further, this line of thought establishes a connection between myth's function and its effect on lives, society, and culture. Here, myth is active, productive, and can be extended to contemporary society.

However, most of Barthes' and Baeten's respective work is entrenched in a Greco-Roman heritage of mythology and rely on Western and Eurocentric knowledge production to define myth and its functions. Paula Gunn Allen, a Pueblo and Sioux Native American writer, challenges this approach by defining and elaborating on myth and mythic narrative through a tribal context, undermining its temporal conditioning as strictly in the past. Allen interrogates dominant notions of myth as presumably fictive, referring to such assumptions and dismissals as a meta-myth itself. On this positionality of understanding myth, she explains, "this attitude falls more along the lines of uncritical acceptance used to justify the social institutions of contemporary societies than of proven relief" (Allen 103). Extending beyond Barthes' assertion of myth as a type of speech, Allen instead argues that myth is a teleological statement, a "psychospiritual ordering of nonordinary knowledge" (Allen 104). Mythic reality, in contrast with material, 'ordinary' reality, can point to negotiations of trauma, survival, and resistance in the violence in and generated by material reality. Allen also notes that the presence of myth in a culture suggests that there are more powers than simply those of that material reality that guide and direct lived experience and memory. As opposed to Barthes' fear-focused framework of mythology and its function as a tool of the bourgeoisie, and further extending beyond Baeten's myth as a tool for marking the other, Allen places myth in the context of the Other, in her case focusing on Native and Indigenous modes of reality, memory, and

tradition. From this, Allen offers us a new addition to our glossary of myth, rooted in resistance, survival, and hope: “Myth is a kind of story that allows a holistic image to pervade and shape consciousness, thus providing a coherent and empowering matrix for action and relationship” (Allen 104-5). Although Allen is most focused on Native and Indigenous enactments of myth and focuses her analysis specifically on those enactments, she does offer that these definitions and functionalities of myth can and do extend to other cultures.

This thesis complicates and challenges the system of myth put forth by Barthes and Baeten by arguing that although their structural mapping of myth is useful in understanding the adverse effects of mythology on marginalized groups, it falls short of adequately accounting for the other functional possibilities of myth as put forth by Allen. The most recent scholars who have attempted to ‘recover’ Marie Laveau treat the functionality of myth in her widespread proliferation as wholly negative and counterproductive, and in their efforts work to dispel myth or at least separate it from material reality, which becomes championed in their work as the necessary means of recovery. Due to this prioritization of realities and the drive to render Laveau as legitimate and real, these scholars almost wholly dismiss mythical narratives that offer potential methods for the uplift and empowerment of southern black women. I am interested in how a system of myth can be reclaimed or re-appropriated through a process of revision; and further, when understood as a contextual cultural and collective reality and vision, how myth can afford methods of empowerment rooted in

tradition and memory. In terms of recovery work on Laveau, this focal shift to myth as a framework problematizes the position of academy as central. In other words, it questions how this centrality reproduces notions of white intellectual property while replicating racialized images of Laveau and Voodoo. As Barthes warns of the naturalizing effects myth has on a specific, political speech, I argue that it also holds the potential to disrupt that political speech and therefore is available as a means of challenging dominant historiography. I rely on the work of feminist historiographers Jessica Enoch and Susan Jarratt to argue that a recovery process in which we write Laveau into the same discipline that has necessarily erased, marginalized, and demonized her would replicate those effects. I posit that we may instead look at the way she has been recorded or not recorded to better interrogate how gendered and racialized rhetorics “call for and create categorical consistency and change” (Enoch and Jarratt 70). In other words, I offer that instead of writing Laveau and subsequently Voodoo into a hegemonically white, masculine discourse, we look at the ways she has been recorded to understand what is being maintained or erased through her historical representation, or lack thereof. I agree with Barthes that it is vital to deconstruct the dominant myth to highlight and reduce the effect of the underlying power systems at work yet disagree that myth only has destructive tendencies and is mostly if not solely useful to “the Right” as opposed to “the Left” as this only allows for articulations in a Eurocentric, Western dialogue. I turn to Allen’s decolonized framework of myth to highlight how certain mythic uptakes of Laveau have made possible new sites of

remembering and knowing that uplift, empower, and incite communality in a black feminist tradition.

### **Recovery as Reflexivity and Retroactivism:**

I use a feminist rhetorical framework for its disciplinary approach that demands awareness of the collaborative aspect of scholarship. I did not come across my findings independently; further, I am primarily relying on the work of others as a point of reference. This framework also demands awareness of positionality, how I am both author and authority. There is a responsibility when writing about history and myth, and especially when writing about a woman of color when one is white, to not repeat or perpetuate the systems I aim to demystify and deconstruct. To be aware of the language of others is to be aware of my own. I cannot assert that other scholars have been introduced to Laveau through the language of myth without acknowledging my own entrance through the same form. It would be without meaning to argue that this thesis will result in a more reliable, truthful representation of Laveau. Being written in the twenty-first century from a completely different foundation, ethos, and language denies this immediately. I automatically work from the standpoint of contemporary concerns and ideologies, refusing any possibilities of self-representation for Laveau. Further, and of extreme importance, I do not aim to recover or represent Laveau. To do either is to insinuate that she has somehow been lost or forgotten, and as she well may have been, the question of being lost or forgotten is a matter of *to whom*.

I trace the double-potentiality of Marie Laveau's social and cultural memory as both reinforcing and reiterating white supremacist narratives while simultaneously

functioning as a space for hope, uplift, and resistance in black feminist modes of being and thinking. I place my interrogations in a timeline that considers Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 tropical cyclone that resulted in the forced migration and criminalization of primarily working-class black women from New Orleans, Louisiana (Ransby 2006). The hardest hit areas—Biloxi, Gulfport, Pascagoula, and, of course, New Orleans—were also areas containing the United States’ highest population of black women living below the poverty line (DeWeever and Hartmann 91). Miles and Austin write of the centrality of stories and rumor in coverage of Hurricane Katrina, noting that “[d]uring and after Katrina, Blacks and Whites experienced two different realities in large part due to their differing negotiation of rumor—and the mass media played to and exploited this” (Miles and Austin 34). These controlling images and narratives of black survival versus white survival underscore the contemporary reiterations of the metalanguage around blackness, even in times of collective crisis.

However, Laveau’s mythical trajectory also illustrates the double-potentiality and multi-functionality of myth itself. Uptake of Laveau as a subject for reimagining and recovery began in the 1930s with Zora Neale Hurston, and has been a primarily women-driven project entrenched in a methodology of identification. A recurring theme I saw in my literature and visual media review of Laveau is that the projects generated by women were affective-based, drawing upon the authors’ lived experience and self-definition to frame their work. From biographers Fandrich, Long, and Ward, to authors Rhodes, Hurston, and Luisah Teish, each write of how they found Laveau or how Laveau came to them, and the kinship they felt to a black woman who died more than a decade before

they were even born. In each of their projects, these scholars and artists challenge hegemonic forms of mythology that enforce that double-position of invisible and hyper-visible through vastly different frameworks. At the same time, nonetheless, they still reiterate both streams of functional myth, including those of fear and fetishization.

Further, I must be aware that by writing about the myth of Laveau I am in my own way creating yet another representation and identification of Laveau, which, as bell hooks emphasizes, I should always be aware of. Not only should I be aware of how I am looking, but also what that looking in itself does, how it reinforces or disrupts certain contexts. What I do aim to contribute to the discourse around Laveau and to further discourse around mythology in a larger sense is a method of interrogating knowledge production through mechanisms of narrativity. In this sense, my focus is on knowledge production as neither concretely “good” or “bad,” but instead as something that can be subject to re-reading and re-writing in terms of resistance. Primary source material in this thesis varies from fictional to biographical to archival. I find each type of source useful when studying motivations behind the perpetuation of the Laveau myth in disparate knowledge-producing locations as each source informs the reading of the others.

I trace the connections between the two and aim to make a map of the Laveau mythology with the semiological concepts of signs, signifiers, and the signified. My focus on mythology and its implications here are twofold: there is the first, which endeavors to explain the racializing effect in both her own symbolism and Voodoo’s. I move to encourage other writers to become aware of mythology and its functioning



powers, asserting that practicing this awareness creates a better understanding of white supremacy not only in the dominant but also in feminist discourse and scholarship. Then there is the second, which pinpoints spaces where this mythology can be re-appropriated into the lexicon of resistance. Here, I argue, is where the situation of reading and re-presenting Laveau as feminist can take place. From that point, I highlight the emerging re-appropriations of Laveau in literature, pop culture, and scholarship. I look at the wide variety of forms that exist within the Laveau myth (creative and scholarly writing, the screen, music) which all have instances of feminist (or empowering) portrayal. I turn specifically to the concepts preserved or emptied from the original mythology process and how either act works in myriad ways to appeal to feminist concerns about mythology and representation. Further, I focus specifically on what the recovery of a dynamic legendary and historical figure such as Laveau offers when concerning ourselves with where we should place her, not only in the realm of scholarship and the archive but in the larger issues of representation and re-presentation in Creole and Cajun regions and social infrastructures, whose discursive and rhetorical underpinnings operate through differently nuanced matrices of power due to its multiply syncretized nature and history.

### **Chapter Outline:**

I will divide the proliferation of the Laveau myth as a Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian iteration into two core phenomenon driven by two tools of white supremacist dialogue: fear and fetishization. The subject of my first chapter is that of historiography and the archive. The concept of archival legitimacy comes into play here, where I

critique the methods of recording Laveau and other people of color in New Orleans during the nineteenth century in creating the historical basis of the myth of Marie Laveau and subsequently of Voodoo. Archival legitimacy comes into play in the collection process of the archive, deciding what or who is important or necessary in the archive. What I am arguing is that through this sorting of material in search of the legitimate, the archive itself becomes an emptied form where the speech of mythology may work. In other words, the archive is a space of mythmaking. The historical and archival phenomenon I refer to is driven by fear. Even the archive seems to contend that it *doesn't mess with that stuff*.

I trace the historical Laveau and locate the gaps in which context is filled. Here, I find Jacques Derrida's writing on the archive useful. Derrida's focus on the preservation practice of the archive as unnatural and dangerous results in his coining the concept of 'archival violence.' Derrida offers that every archive is "at once *institutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional. An *eco-nomic* archive in this double sense: it keeps it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) or in making people respect the law" (Derrida 7). I extend this by arguing that the archive as we know it preserves a specific narrative upheld by the ideology of white supremacy. Much like my belief pertaining to myth, though, I believe that the archive has feminist and anti-racist potential. This emerges from Derrida's explanation of the technological impact on the archive. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida investigates Sigmund Freud's home as an archive and moves us to imagine the difference

functions it might have taken if email had been present. I look at the creation of nontraditional archives that works against white supremacy and for feminist purposes. For Kate Eichhorn, the archive functions in three manners: as a text, as a site of gesture, and as a site of transit (Eichhorn 41). The idea of the archive as text refers to Derrida's writing on the archive. Eichhorn elaborates on the understanding of the archive as a text, delineating it as a mode of production. Eichhorn furthers, "To suggest that the archive functions as a text is to suggest that the archive is not a symptom of classification, but rather something that persistently troubles the idea of classification itself" (Eichhorn 41). The archive can become disruptive to the classification process of myth, the naming of the "us" and the "them."

Throughout this work, I will be developing a definition of myth and its function through a racialized feminist lens. The myth's signifier, or full concept, can be disrupted and emptied while its sign, or image, can be re-appropriated and filled with a different, critical concept. I rely on the work of scholars such as bell hooks and Michele Wallace to re-center the feminist discussion of myth and historiography to note where we (specifically white feminist scholars) need to make more concentrated efforts on undoing the systems even we benefit from. Since myth and voyeurism are colluding forces, I suggest we start with looking. If according to Baeten, myth works to mark an Other, an outsider, someone who must be read but must not speak themselves, then looking is the process by which this happens. Looking at or upon, subjectifying and objectifying a marginalized person or culture is certainly not a new concept. This

looking, this distinction between an *I* and a *they*, or an *us* and an *them*, is a problem on two levels: one, as already expounded upon, it establishes an Other, usually a marginalized group, and delegitimizes beliefs or traits associated to their identity; the second, that ever present emptying of meaning, results in the replaced dominant image that is also ever present.

In my next chapter, I trace the uptake of Marie Laveau by the Louisiana Writers Project (LWP) during the 1930s to contemporary undertakings of Laveau in print and media to trace that historical underpinning of myth Barthes underlines and its generative force as a reification of white supremacist patriarchy that relies on Euro-and-Western-centric modes of knowledge production. The LWP was a branch of the Federal Writers Project, a government initiative to collect and preserve oral narratives. The writers for the LWP, many from Louisiana themselves, were tasked with locating the “local color” of the area and interview them. A few of these writers, most notably Robert Tallant, fostered a specific interest in the stories of Marie Laveau. Tallant, along with Lyle Saxon and Catherine Dillon, all took up writing projects (some collaborative) with Laveau as their subject. Tallant remains the most focused on Laveau, having published two books that focus on her: *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946) and *The Voodoo Queen* (1956). Although these projects were also motivated by fear (themes of sacrifice, nudity, and gluttony prevail), this occurrence motivated by the fetishization of women of color. In Tallant’s work and in the collected oral narratives of the LWP, Marie Laveau was presented as both as a subject of fear and an object of desire. Though we actually have no

evidence of what Laveau actually looked like while alive, we do have multiple secondhand accounts of her beauty. Laveau is described having a lighter, caramel colored skin, dark eyes, full red lips, and even fuller hips. Her sexuality becomes a point of interest for many who write about her, some attributing tens of partners to her while others keep passionate encounters to her marriages.

At the end of the next chapter, I focus on the show and its specific season that brought me to this project, *American Horror Story: Coven*, utilizing bell hooks' concept of the *oppositional gaze*, which works to interrogate most specifically the representation of black women on screen to see the contemporary implications and iterations of this historico-mythology. Here, I am focusing on contemporary iterations of the Laveau myth as generated by those Euro-and-Western-centric modes of mythology and renderings, which place Laveau as well as other black bodies on the screen in relation to and as a plot-driving technique for whiteness. I also look at the representations of and reliance on certain black women on screen tropes and how they are utilized to make Laveau and subsequently those other black characters (there is only one other regularly speaking black character) legible to a primarily white audience and speaks to those fears driven by whiteness that so heavily hold up the "horror" in the show's moniker.

Undoubtedly, these motivations and functions of the Laveau myth are detrimental to anti-racism work. The normalization of Laveau and Voodoo as Other has specific implications when writing about/with or, most necessarily and importantly, *listening to* Cajun and Creole women of color in Louisiana and southeast Texas. A renewed interest

in the last few decades has put emphasis on the mysticism and magical characteristics attributed to Voodoo, creating narratives which Brenda Marie Osbey notes are “no less sensational or voyeuristic than their earlier models” (Osbey 9). Osbey is highly critical of the displacement of meaning with the normalization of concepts for Voodoo. Writing in response to those outside of Voodoo or who want to be ‘let into the club,’ she states,

[P]eople sometimes confuse the capacity of culture to expand, to assimilate outside influences and to grow into newer forms with the notion that everything is accessible and available to everyone at all times. That outsiders always eventually become insiders (9).

Recent attempts to write Marie Laveau into history, or at least to legitimize her through biography, have made the same attempts to find a place inside the circle. Scholar Ina J. Fandrich even claims to have undergone an initiation to become a Voodoo priestess. Further, Fandrich, along with author and anthropologist Martha Ward, have made adoptive claims of New Orleans as their ‘home city.’ Ward went so far as to say “[...] New Orleans is a magnificent and inclusive city, and I have loved her longer than I have ever loved a man” (Ward XIII). Barthes’ argument that myth is dangerous is undeniable—what I disagree with is his focus on the marginalized as those who must always be subject to its power rather than enacting it, and further how certain dangers can be hopeful.

Chapter two looks at two other iterations of the contemporary Laveau myth, both black-generated: Jewell Parker Rhodes’ novel *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) and Selwyn Sefu Hinds’ and Denys Cowan’s seven volume comic book series *Dominique Laveau*:

*Voodoo Child* (2012). Here, I elaborate on Allen's focus on the mythic narrative as "an articulation of thought or wisdom not expressible in other forms" and as a "necessary dimension of human expression, a dimension that is categorically unique" (Allen 103). I also work with Tara T. Green's work on Rhodes' novel, and her argument that Rhodes is working from a point of 'medium' for Laveau, highlighting how tradition and collective memory drive resistant myth authorship. Further, I look at those functional themes of mythology that find their place in these narratives, such as the matrilineal line of familial knowledge and power that takes place in both of these works as the main characters come into power through this passing down of what Allen would refer to as non-ordinary knowledge. I read the running themes of lineage and the inheritance of knowledge to achieve a multi-temporal self-definition wherein recalling memories of past trauma serve to figure a present and future possibility of becoming for southern black women.

My conclusion then looks at these three contemporary representations of Laveau in conjunction (*Coven*, *Voodoo Dreams*, *Dominique Laveau*) and their publication/production timeline in relation to Hurricane Katrina, looking at where and how those earlier forms of white supremacy and specifically the subjection of black women in these affected areas remain and resonate through those multiple functions of myth as white-generated. I highlight how black women in these areas were the most affected by the hurricane, and look at the precursory systems that led up to this, such as the even higher poverty rate for these women than other black women in the country

and the high(ly ironic) criminalization and incarceration of black women for sex work in these areas. I look at southern black women's modes of social and political resistance, connecting it to those heritages of resistance mythology and the communal/familial emphasis that lay the groundwork for their methodologies. I turn back to Laveau through Osbey's essay and Luisah Teish's writing on her in her spiritual guidebook, interrogating further that question of *who* Laveau is supposed to or can serve and the implications of white women calling on a black woman from beyond the grave to inspire or serve them.

In this thesis, I aim to create a map of the Laveau myth from the archive, to the LWP, to present day representations of her on the screen and in print. The guiding question of this work is: How and why has the myth of Marie Laveau proliferated in so many spaces, and further, how does this myth have the potential to be disruptive to the dominating context? I posit that the recent past decades might offer an idea, with a growing attraction to Laveau occurring within the past twenty-four years. This time period is the focus of my third chapter. The renewed interest in Laveau peaks shortly after Hurricane Katrina. Here, the image of Laveau as a matriarchal, protective figure begins establishing itself within the context of the myth. Paying specific attention to Laveau and how she is represented and re-presented in the past twenty-four years in scholarship as well in print and television, I argue that her mythology has developed a crack in usage: there already are places where Marie Laveau has been translated into a



feminist, restorative power, specifically through a black southern feminine tradition of remembering and looking again. Though these spaces need much attention and elaboration, they do offer an imagination of what a feminist usage of myth may look like.

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORICO-MYTHOLOGY: THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE LAVEAU MYTH

I soon realized why so many people before me had given up on researching the life history of New Orleans' great Voodoo Queen. The data about her were not only scarce and fragmented, but also highly contradictory and confusing (Fandrich 152).

The most thoroughly, academically-gear'd researched of the work on Marie Laveau, Ina J. Fandrich's 2005 *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux*<sup>1</sup> repeatedly laments the lack of material information available. This lack is for two interconnected reasons: Laveau was a black woman living in the nineteenth century who was unable to read or write, leaving no record of her own as indication of who she was, what she thought, or what she did professionally or spiritually. Further, as a black woman in this time period, there would be scant governmental record of her. Though she has been rumored to have been wealthy and powerful, she was still deemed as unnecessary to historical record, which focused (and in many spaces, still focuses on) the affairs and events of white persons. In summarizing the origins of the archive, Jacques Derrida offers that the archive comes from a point of ownership, being used mainly to record what property and/or land was owned by whom, marking legal transactions of property. This can account for why the little governmental

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<sup>1</sup>As Fandrich has noted, there are multiple spellings of the Laveau name. She adheres to 'Laveaux' due to her own historical focus. I adhere to 'Laveau' because it is the most commonly used spelling as it appears in her mythology.

archival material Fandrich works from is mostly transactional papers and registrations of property. This can account for why the little governmental archival material Fandrich works from is mostly transactional papers and registrations of property. Religious archives, still sparse with black persons, did offer Fandrich information on birth and baptismal record, and she was at least able to address the rumors of Laveau's birth year, which has long been argued as either 1794 or 1801, noting a baptismal record signed by Father Antoine of St. Louis Cathedral, which may confirm it as the latter. However, with the large number of women living during this time period carrying the same name or some spelling variation of it, we cannot be entirely sure.

Nevertheless, there is 'historical' work on Laveau prior to Fandrich and her contemporaries that relies mostly on oral narratives and storytelling. This chapter looks at the complex and intertwining *historico-mythology* that has become the basis of the Laveau myth. This term is my own neologism and I use it to refer to a meta-myth of history that assumes a dominant form of knowledge that is all-knowing; a genre of knowing which accounts for all or as much as possible of persons, events, locations, and time. Similarly, in Paula Gunn Allen's meta-myth of mythology the mythological is deemed ignorant, primitive, and dishonest. This oppositional meta-mythology creates a rhetoric of distinction between what Fandrich and Carolyn Morrow Long term the "Historical Laveau" and the "Laveau Myth/Legend," insinuating and forthright arguing that there is or can be some clear divide between the two where the former represents some unbiased knowledge base and the latter is treated as frivolous gossip and conjecture. This dismissal of mythology as a type of knowledge works through a form of

naturalization that Roland Barthes isolates as a tool *of* mythology. Here I am talking about two types of mythology; that mythology which get dismissed is that cultural form of remembering, recovery, and revision that Paula Gunn Allen locates across Indigenous and diasporic peoples. The myth that dismisses both itself and the cultural myth is what Barthes and Elizabeth M. Baeten preoccupy themselves with when writing about myth as functioning to maintain certain structures of power. The myth that dismisses itself as well as cultural myth that Barthes and Baeten write about is that which I address in this chapter. Specifically, I interrogate how understandings of blackness and womanhood in the U.S. South are reinforced through the historico-mythologization of Marie Laveau through a matrix of fear, fetishization, and an investment in whiteness as intellectual property.

### **Historico-Marie Laveau:**

The method by which I map this functional strain of the Laveau myth utilizes Roland Barthes' theory of myth as a semiological system, specifically a second-order semiological system. This second-order system is a part of a chain by which it hangs off that first-order semiological system. As myth takes possession of language, the sign in the first-order system becomes the signifier in the second. For Barthes, myth is a type of speech: a stolen language emptied and filled with 'new' concepts. This speech already exists; it must be in a pre-existing state to be stolen with pre-existing concepts to be emptied. These concepts, along with those that replace them, each take hold with a historical foundation. Barthes comments on the process by which myth chooses language to steal: "Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so a

to make it suitable for communication [...]” (Barthes 219, his emphasis). As he emphasizes, myth is legible due to its reliance on preceding memory, yet Barthes does not expend time on interrogating which concept/history empties and which replaces. Extending beyond Barthes’ concern with myth as a tool of bourgeoisie and instead also considering myth as a tool of patriarchal white supremacy, these multiple histories beg critical attention.

Semiology places speech as a system of signs and symbols that do not have static meaning. Rather, speech relies on its spatial and temporal relations to other concepts, ideas, and words. The semiological system breaks down into three functional parts: the sign, signifier, and signified, where the latter two elements combine to make up the first. The signifier and signified are often both referred to as a concept. However, Barthes warns that we should be careful to remember one is full of meaning (the signified) while the other is an empty form (the signifier). To give an example and redirect the conversation to the subject of this paper I will refer to those descriptors I have already offered for the image of Marie Laveau. The tignon I so readily identify, in itself the empty, tangible image that is the signifier. In the first semiological system, the tignon’s signified would communicate a head wrap worn by black women in nineteenth-century New Orleans under the legal mandates of the Code Noir. It is used to signify the contextual knowledge that *I* bring to the transaction as reader. The concept I relate to the tignon is the sign. Here, it is important to note that there must be an audience or ‘reader’ of the sign for communication of ideas and concepts.

Barthes also argues that myth is a second semiological system which hangs off that first semiological system, where the sign (that sum of signifier and signified) of the first becomes the mere signifier in the second system. Another form is emptied and filled with a concept. Per Barthes,

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language (or the modes of representation which are assimilated to it), which I shall call the language object, because it is the language which myth gets hold of in order to build its own system; and myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage, because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first. (Barthes 224)

Returning back to my example of the tignon: the tignon retains shape but what is signified is that of Voodoo and blackness through its social and historical entrenchments within the Code Noir, a eighteenth-century legal document regarding race laws and slavery regulation in France and French colonial regions. The ‘tignon law’ in the code, established in 1786, prohibited women of color in New Orleans from any ‘excessiveness’ in their manner of dress. Specifically, women of color were made to keep their hair covered so as to lessen their desirability to white men. There is already a positioning of black women as threat to a type of morality or purity. As the majority of Voodoo practitioners in nineteenth-century Louisiana were black women, the tignon has come to be understood as a part of the image of Voodoo in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Myth becomes increasingly contextual here: as it becomes active, it constitutes or constructs meaning. According to Barthes, anything *can* be myth, but that does not mean everything *is*. Barthes reiterates that for something to become mythological, it must have a historical foundation: it does not evolve organically. Further, Barthes offers that myth is not confined to speech. Due to its

functional capacity, myth can and does take form in writing, cinema, music, reporting, and so on. The functional capacity of myth, Barthes says, is that of a type of message. What this message communicates is a concept. Per Barthes, the historical grounding of the form of myth is emptied and filled with this concept.

The issue for Barthes with myth is that these concepts which fill the form are politically charged displacements of what Baeten calls the “contingent origin of events or meanings with what appears to be meaningful” (Baeten 95). Seeing myth as having a dangerous normalizing effect on the underlying discourse it is perpetuating, Barthes believes that we should disrupt the process of myth and work to reveal its motivation and therefore strip the power from the myth. Myth naturalizes history, assuming man-made accounts as organic. The myth achieves this through those spatiotemporal contingencies mentioned above. These involve the juxtaposing of words and the identification of said myth to a time period always in the past, oriented to what Baeten more specifically names as a “sacred past” (116). This sacred past refers to a period of time that is mythical in character: it offers an idea, but not concrete knowledge of the events that take place. The knowledge that *is* present is scarce, holed, much like the ‘hard’ information we have on Marie Laveau. For myth to take place, there must be some sort of historical emptying that has already taken place.

Myth is politically charged in function but is in itself depoliticized speech. The political speech which drives myth could be seen as the first semiological system off of which that metalanguage of mythology hangs, such as the historical reality of the Code Noir and its laws on black women covering their hair. Barthes distinguishes between the uses of myth on “the left” and “the right,” arguing that although mythology is a necessary power in the latter, the former relies on it sparingly. This relies on the position

of the mythologist. Along with the replacement of a history with a context, Barthes offers another principal figure in the process of myth: identification. Per Barthes, “the petit bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other” (Barthes 265). Conversely, he posits that the positioning on the left is always in relation to the oppressed. This can best be understood in Baeten’s mapping of the myth as a marking of the Other. Baeten postulates that what we deem mythical we do so by placing it outside of our own belief systems: mythologists are not asking the question, “why do *we* believe this or act this way?” Instead, they position their subject as something far away, observable from the outside. This framing creates a *they* to investigate. When this investigation results in ideas or narratives not compatible with the dominating set of values, it becomes mythical. Here, myth can be understood as a form of ethnography. For example, marking West African influenced religions such as New Orleans Voodoo as entrenched in and generated by the mythical because they do not correlate with Judeo-Christian values that canonize knowledge produced by white men allows for their subsequent placement as a ‘primitive’ religion.

It is important to understand that though this continuous relegation of mythic time to the past is occurring during the mythmaking process, that the process and speech remain active. Barthes agrees that myth is not something that occurs only with what is deemed as antique, but can function with the contemporary, marking the present as location for a type of mythmaking. The speech of myth is generative with every utterance. Though the subject of myth is relegated to the past, the myth itself is ever present, ever active.



Since this myth is already always active, anyone who participates in this specific speech act is also always already representing or re-presenting Laveau, constructing their own image of her for their own purposes.

Studying myth along the lines that Baeten and Barthes offer, we can begin to understand how Euro-Western and Judeo-Christian forms and functions of myth work through a property interest in whiteness. In her work “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl I. Harris explains,

The origins of whiteness as property lie in the parallel systems of domination of Black and Native American peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights...In particular, whiteness and property share a common premise—a complicated nucleus—of a right to exclude (Harris 1714).

Though Harris writes about the relationship between whiteness and literal notions of property, she allows that her work also speaks to the ever-evolving teleology of property, including creative and intellectual property. Here, when I write of whiteness as property, I am writing of white investment in intellectual property, or the right to knowledge, knowing, and articulating such modes of knowing. However, Harris’ focus on the legal foundations of an investment in whiteness also applies here; in fact, it highlights the legislative realities of mythologies. For example, returning to the tignon law that generates such a rich narrative complexity in identifying the tignon as a symbol of blackness and womanhood: the tignon law was instated as an investment in the pure white family. Free women of color, if allowed to present themselves as anyway desirable, might lure white men away from white women, corrupting their blood lines and social/class status. In addition, the tignon as a signifier of blackness worked as a racial identifier for those women of color who were not so easily identified by the color of their

skin. Quadroons and octoroons (as listed in the nineteenth century by the percentage of black blood) were ever more threatening to the purity of whiteness, as these women could ‘pass’ more easily.

It is my argument that investments in the institution are investments in an intellectual system constructed by and for whiteness. This first mapping of myth as semiology highlights what I call the historico-mythology of Marie Laveau. In historico-mythology, knowledge is ordered and naturalized through its relationship (or lack thereof) to the academy. Barthes and Baeten underline this naturalization through a nuanced mythological system in which some object, person, and/or event that already holds some contextual meaning in history (having at least existed or occurred) is emptied and filled with a politically charged discourse. The particular politically charged discourse that fills the larger sign symbol of Marie Laveau erupts from that investment in intellectual property, which is a larger investment in whiteness (or white modes of knowledge, the stake of white space in the academy, the academy as generated from white knowledge production). A large part of historico-mythology has to do with what we understand as historical, how we read history, how we practice historiography, and further how these are all tied to institutional knowledge and knowing.

### **Archiving Laveau:**

With regards to Marie Laveau, her myth, and its semiological process, I interrogate categorization in the archive as it is flagged as the first and foremost space for research. The historical projects I interrogate in this chapter are all sourced heavily from various archives as well as expend time on how and where the scholars were able to

locate Laveau in these archives. Those who work to read Laveau as feminist lament her infrequent presence yet do not highlight how and why Laveau entered the archive other than her inconsistent reputation and treatment as a nineteenth-century black woman in New Orleans. Indeed, her consistently marginalized subjectivity and its ties to her being illiterate and therefore leaving behind no written work, notes, or letters of her own does highly affect her presence or lack thereof in the archive. How then do we account for the building of and contribution to her archival occupancy *after* her death? And in what modes do these contributions take? Finally, how does their organization and consignment contribute to a certain way of reading Laveau, and subsequently of reading southern black women?

To understand the archive as space of historico-mythology where knowledge is produced and not simply materially collected, I turn back to the question of Marie Laveau's entrance into the archive through religious and legal documents. As a black woman in the nineteenth century, Laveau entered the archive through census reporting and property matters. These were and sometimes still are the most accessible routes for black women to public memory. Yet, though this sort of archival presence is common for free women of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans, Laveau's further archival projection is peculiar, even for a 'known' practitioner of Voodoo during that time period.

Laveau's existence was certainly known outside of New Orleans, Louisiana for more than a decade prior to her death. In 1869, the *Chicago Tribune* was already hailing

Laveau as “Queen of the Voudous”<sup>2</sup>, illustrating that her mythical and historical trajectory did not begin with her corporeal death but more particularly during her lifetime in the post bellum era. The majority of newspapers documented during this era mention dances at St. John’s Bayou or legal matters. Prior to the Civil War, Voodoo was sensationalized as an ‘exotic’ experience and even capitalized upon by the growing tourism industry of New Orleans. Due to the racialized rhetoric of the postbellum period, though, any religion and/or cultural tradition associated with blackness held anxiety-inducing meaning for whites. With fear of a racial uprising and a loss of income through the subsequent abolition the Civil War would bring, the legal disputes section of local New Orleans’ newspapers filled with accusations of mainly black women participating in Voodoo practices and ritual. As with the post-Katrina criminalization of black women in street-based economies, the postbellum ‘crisis’ in the south marked Voodoo (which is primarily a black, woman-centered religion) as a threat to the moral and social order of New Orleans. Gatherings of black persons became increasingly policed, while mixed-race gatherings were made totally illegal as these black women were made to be seen as corrupting or radicalizing whites, specifically white women who were deemed emotionally and intelligently vulnerable. At this point, black women were rendered simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible through their sentencing in the courts as well as announcements in local papers regarding their Voodoo-related transgressions.

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<sup>2</sup> *Chicago Tribune*. (Chicago, Ill.), 11 Sept. 1869. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib of Congress. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014064/1869-09-11/ed-1/seq-2/> (Newspaper Article).

It is within these legal disputes that I have found the first noted public reference to Marie Laveau as being a practitioner of Voodoo. Further, these articles immediately named her as a “Voodoo Queen” without any preceding knowledge of her cited with such a title. The title itself is not something that even exists within Louisiana Voodoo. As Brenda Marie Osbey points out in reference to those who claim to undergo some initiation or rite of passage as some ‘Queen’ or ‘Priestess,’ these titles are arbitrary and have undoubtedly been assigned by those with little to no knowledge of the actual organization of Louisiana Voodoo. Osbey writes, “Anyone who claims to be one [Priestess, Queen, Priest] is lying. And anyone who claims to have consulted one—and that includes Zora Neale Hurston<sup>3</sup> and her laughable tales of snakes and nudity and black cat bones—is either lying, was duped, or some unfortunate combination of the two” (Osbey 4). The most probable reasoning for Laveau to have already been bestowed with this title is that the majority of her infamy during and after her lifetime was generated through oral narratives, or more commonly gossip and word-of-mouth. As we will see with the Louisiana Writers’ Project, there was and continues to be a heavy reliance on collective oral knowledge and memory when it comes to those desiring to learn more Laveau and her influence. In other words, Marie Laveau as Myth proliferated from Marie Laveau as Rumor.

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<sup>3</sup> The bulk of Zora Neale Hurston’s work on Voodoo centered Haitian practices, customs, and beliefs. However, her work *Mules and Men* (1935) and essay “Hoodoo in America” (1931) expends time on New Orleans Voodoo and Marie Laveau. In both works, Hurston references her study with Samuel Thompson, a practitioner who claimed to be the grandnephew of Marie Laveau (Hurston 327).

### **Rumour and the Orality of the Laveau Myth:**

Laveau in an ethno-historical sense rose to prominence during the 1930-40s with the Louisiana Writers' Project (LWP) and subsequent work by its employees, notably Robert Tallant and Lyle Saxon. The LWP functioned as an employment opportunity for predominantly white writers to collect oral narrative from the 'local color.' The LWP's research and interviews produced knowledge published and unpublished. Writers like Saxon and Tallant used their work for their own books on the subject of Voodoo and Marie Laveau. Both writers worked in partnership with Assistant Director Edward Dreyer and compiled the *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (1945), their collection of Louisiana folk tales. Shortly after, Tallant wrote *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946) and then ten years later, *The Voodoo Queen* (1956). With backing from LWP director Lyle Saxon and his own status as an employee of the government, Tallant's books were regarded as historical timepieces stocked with fact. In a foreword to *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Saxon writes, "Much nonsense has been written about Voodoo in New Orleans. It seems to me that here is a truthful and definitive picture" (Tallant v). Though very few know the name Robert Tallant, they know his work through the images and concepts of Voodoo he wrote of. Tallant, Saxon, Dreyer, along with Catherine Dillon, created and collected the bulk of archival material on Marie Laveau. Unlike the former three, Catherine Dillon's exhaustive manuscript on Voodoo and Laveau was never published. The majority of her work is nestled on the shelves of the Cammie G. Henry Research Center of the Northwestern University of Louisiana.

The significance of the above-mentioned contributors extends beyond the question of why Marie Laveau entered the archive to answer how: the assignation of

genre and its subsequent organization. As the LWP was foremost a project geared towards the collection and maintaining of Louisiana folklore, Marie Laveau as subject of this project is also relegated to the same genre as well. The Louisiana Writers' Project was always already intended for the archive as historical and ethnographic research done in a similar spirit to census records: for the sake of record-keeping and accuracy. What is astonishing, however, is the additional uptake of Laveau by writers such as Robert Tallant. Both *Voodoo in New Orleans* and *The Voodoo Queen* can be read as a nostalgic framing of black presence and experience in New Orleans, especially when covering the subject of Marie Laveau. In these books, Tallant painted Laveau as a manipulative Voodoo Queen whose beauty drove much of the talk about her. Indeed, Laveau's representation in media, old and contemporary, exploits some facet of sexuality. Much like the problematic of Rachel Polgreen's archive interrogated by scholar Marisa J. Fuentes, I argue that this sexualized representation of Laveau propels white supremacist ideals on racialized action and sexual activity, or, as Fuentes posits, anti-black sentiment (Fuentes 572). This too erupts from an investment in whiteness as property, and the threat that blackness poses to its maintenance.

Much of the early ethnohistorical work on Marie Laveau focuses on her as primarily a Voodoo 'Queen' or 'Priestess.' In these writings, Laveau appears as a figure of mesmerizing chaos. Both Saint and Sinner, Laveau was either redeemed or reviled for the same qualities due to different racialized concepts. There is Marie Laveau the Healer, who worked alongside Father Antoine of St. Louis Cathedral to treat patients with yellow fever. The obituaries and writers who mention this Laveau figure regard her as

generous and tireless as with *The Northern Pacific Farmer*, who, in their obituary, noted “Wherever she went she labored faithfully and gained life-long friends. During yellow fever and cholera epidemics she proved herself a noble, disinterested woman, going from patient to patient, administering to the wants of each and saving many from death.”<sup>4</sup>

Then there is Marie Laveau the Medicine Woman, whom many claimed healed them or someone they knew through burning candles and herb mixtures. Though both figures treat and heal, the Saint-Sinner always comes into play on the basis of contextual contingencies. Laveau’s actions and their spatiotemporal effects only seem to converge under the premise of power. Regardless of Laveau’s treatment as wretched or beloved, the bulk of those who have written about Marie Laveau agree that she had power.

From 1950 to the 1980s, there was little interest in Laveau as a point of historical uptake or revision. That does not mean that there was no interest in Laveau; she does appear in some historical fiction and even as a character in the Marvel comic universe where her figuring took much more dramatic liberties and the commitment to her actuality was sidelined. With the second wave of feminism blossoming in the 1990s, however, Laveau offered a promising study as a ‘strong woman leader.’ It is important to note that neither Fandrich, Long, or Ward explicitly engage with feminist language or terminology, nor do they position themselves as feminists themselves. However, their work and positioning of Laveau as Fandrich articulates in her title (*The Mysterious Marie Laveaux: A Study of **Powerful Female Leadership** in Nineteenth Century New Orleans* (my emphasis)) speaks specifically to feminism as a framework for studying and reading Laveau. Here I am defining a feminist framework as one

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<sup>4</sup> *The Northern Pacific farmer*. (Wadena, Minn.), 07 July 1881. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90059028/1881-07-07/ed-1/seq-2/>>



that critiques normative gendering of narratives, which are complex in being classed, racialized, spatial, and temporal. Moreover, a feminist framework is interdisciplinary in its approach, allowing for a cross-examination of genres and texts, a method extremely useful in analyzing a proliferation of mythology. The placement of these different uptakes of Laveau into their specific historical junctures is a useful feminist rhetorical strategy when writing history. As scholars Susan Jarratt and Rory Ong highlight in their work, there is a need to reveal the underlying rhetoric behind “historical” accounts to reveal underlying power structures at work. When the majority of history is told through a white cishetero-male perspective, where does one begin when recovering a free woman of color that lived in nineteenth-century New Orleans? Even more, what if this history is one told from a perspective that is non-white, non-masculine, and non-reliant on Judeo-Christian centralized interpretations, not only culturally and spatially, but also temporally? A pressing issue at hand is the gaps in our subject’s history that have been filled with narrative conjecture propelled by oral exchanges and newspaper clippings. This next section interrogates the implications of recovering Laveau as a Woman figure (at the very least, as she is not ever truly explicated upon as a figure for uptake explicitly as feminist or through feminism) through the same institution that has served to marginalize, dismiss, and erase black women and their subsequent modes of being, remembering, and surviving.

### **Contemporary Implication of the Laveau Archive Problematic:**

Scholars Ina J. Fandrich, Carolyn Morrow Long, and Martha Ward are most likely the best-known contemporary scholars who study Laveau as a historical project.

Each researcher expends a lengthy amount of time attempting to legitimize Laveau through sparse “hard evidence” in the archive and newspapers from the span of Laveau’s lifetime. They work to uncover some lost image of a woman they feel has received an enormous amount of injustice through her treatment as a mythical figure. These scholars, all white, fixate on the socioeconomic and racial stratification of nineteenth-century New Orleans. They argue that the necessity of historicizing Laveau lies in the fact that she in her position as a free woman of color garnered power and attention during a time that (for them) *does not make sense*. Though Fandrich, Long, and Ward do not explicitly use the term ‘feminist’ to describe their work, they do such work through feminist rhetorical practices of recovery, affect, and identification. Further, their revisionist focuses on Laveau as a figure and example of “powerful female leadership” (as literally stated in Fandrich’s title) resonates similarly to feminist historiographic goals. As such, I map their scholarship in a cross-discipline expanse that includes feminist knowledge and practices.

I argue that these scholars’ separate uptakes of Laveau are drenched in irony in three ways: first, though they condemn the mythological Laveau, all entered her knowledge location through that mythology; second, though all spend significant time on the spatiotemporal contingencies of their constructions of her narrative, none expend on those same contingencies when it comes to their sources; third, despite their deliberate placement of themselves within their writing, there is little of their work dedicated to self-reflexive practices as scholars also active in constructing Laveau through their research and writing. In short, their work does more to repeat the process of fetishization than to recover Laveau from any recurring process of mythologization. Further, and most importantly, by

prioritizing sources generated and collected by the academy and government, these scholars reproduce an investment in whiteness as intellectual property.

It begins with the archive. Much recovery work on women focuses on their presence or lack thereof in the archive. Marie Laveau is rendered invisible in the archive by the fact that she was illiterate. No hope lies in the scrutiny of personal letters or recipes. No Voodoo spells written by the queen can be found even in the most ‘special’ of collections. Indeed, most archived writing on Laveau took place well after her death. The few remnants we have from her lifetime include a small number of legal documents with her signature ‘X’ and various newspaper articles. Even so, this is where Ina J. Fandrich centers her chapter on what she calls the “Historical Laveau” (Fandrich 145). This moniker becomes a proper name, a translation of knowledge of Laveau by

Fandrich’s historicizing project. Fandrich’s chapter on the Historical Laveau begins with the multiplicity of Laveau’s name. According to Fandrich, “[a] great deal of the mystery and the confusion around the famous Voodoo Queen stems from the fact that Mariea Laveaux, spelled in various ways [...] was a fairly common name in early nineteenth-century New Orleans” (Fandrich 152). Fandrich points out that along with this multiplicity, at least ten of these women were free women of color who lived within a mile of each other in the French Quarter. Though she highlights this difficulty in searching for the ‘true’ Laveau, Fandrich does not explicate on her method of differentiation. Rather, immediately after taking note of the various Marie Laveaus, she jumps straight into her biographical rendering of her Voodoo Queen, or rather Fandrich’s conceptualization of a “Historical Laveau.”

The Historical Laveau as a name proper begins with the archive due to the naturalization process that takes effect in that space. The naturalization process I refer to is the process by which knowledge gets presented as true due to its reiteration, materialization, and placement in the institution. The archive's treatment as a stable space of knowledge is the predication on which this process finds its foundation. For scholars like Fandrich, Long, and Ward, the archive is the ultimate space because it affirms the existence of Marie Laveau. The few legal documents found in the city archives become indisputable hubs of knowledge. We *know* that Marie Laveau was born on September 10, 1801. Through a discovery of Laveau's birth certificate by Fandrich, this has become its own point of knowledge. The archive is not a space of just any stable knowledge, but specifically knowledge that has been relegated to the past. This relegation to the past is not unlike the relegation of Laveau to the past found in the writings of George Washington Cable or Robert Tallant. As Laveau symbolizes an era passed, so she becomes an artifact of an archive. Yet, as the archive is understood as that indisputable hub of knowledge, so its inventory must reflect its ethos. Therefore, the archive only accepts work that is read as indisputable because of those who write it. In this case, and in many others, the archive has a generative relationship with the government.

In its conception, the archive was a domestic dwelling of a citizen entrusted to keep legal papers and other documents. This initial objective of the archive to collect and preserve government documents has followed into today, as most government documents have an unquestionable space in some archive for the purposes of census, property, legal or otherwise relative reference. This placement in the archive affords a type of privilege. As archives have grown to include more than only government writings, but manuscripts,

letters, etc., this privilege has remained, however transformed into new iterations and classifications. The notion of who gets to speak and why remains heavily in the collection process of the archive. Jacques Derrida writes, “With such a status, the documents, which are not always discursive writings, are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged *topology*” (Derrida 3, his emphasis). The primary and secondary sources on Marie Laveau in the archive are government documents, the primary being birth certificates, census reports, and property documents, and the second being those stories collected and rewritten by the LWP, a chapter of the Federal Writers’ Project. By the nineteenth century, archives had already branched past the government document to other materials, yet what materials could find a legitimate place for a free woman of color who was illiterate? As much as archives and their content are understood as spaces of the past, they retain current and drive future systems of privilege, both in terms of knowledge production and cultural hegemony.

The archive is a space of classification, identification, and naming. What enters the archive as deposit is sorted into its ‘rightful place.’ The privilege of collection comes into play here as well, in Derrida’s words, in a *topo-nomology*. There are those which are of the highest order (government documents) and fall through order of that which have less importance in the process of lawmaking. For Derrida, the archive is above all a space of lawmaking, one which not only constructs the past according to its privileged topology, but one which also dictates the future through such topologies. With much of the work on Marie Laveau’s life being classified as that of folklore (as can be inferred by Clayton’s remarks), then we shall find Laveau on the lowest of the topological orders.

Knowledge of Laveau placed in the archive is at the same time privileged and disadvantaged: in other words, there is space for Laveau in the archive but only space for work on her by hegemonically white authors. Written work by people of color on Laveau, though little, is absolutely absent from the archive.

Yet, Laveau's presence in the archive is marked by a much more dynamic process than simply classification as folklore or myth. In Derrida's *Archive Fever*, the archontic principle lies not only in classification, identification, or naming, but also in *consignation*. This, as Derrida explains, not only refers to the act of assigning material to a place or residence but the "act of *consigning through gathering together signs*" (Derrida 3, his emphasis). These signs all correlate into a system that could at once be understood as semiological; all signs converge to make meaning. Moreover, this consignation initiates a presupposing of the subject. Therefore, the presuppositions about Marie Laveau and Voodoo structure this gathering together of signs that fulfill this presupposition. This archontic principle refuses heterogeneity or separation between signs, demanding a neater *gathering together* of materials and signs. The institutionalization of knowledge occurs here, at the gathering of a cohesive history, a collection of 'facts' and 'trustworthy' written work by white ethnographers, historians, and reporters. This gathering together initiates narrative process, where the chronological ordering (and reading) of signs and the material that bears them results in its own historiography.

And so the archive becomes a space of mythmaking by and for whiteness as intellectual property. In many aspects, the archive works almost identically to myth in

that it naturalizes dominant knowledge production. The archive naturalizes history, much like myth, by presenting history as a material truth that has somehow gone untouched. Additionally, the institutional archive does not account for its classification process, such as what gets included or excluded from the archive, how these chosen pieces are arranged and classified in genre, and how their proximity to each other create a distinct historical narrative. In the same strain of semiological systems, both myth and the archive presuppose an always already truth about their subject, building on that truth in form of a narrative, sometimes historic and others folkloric. Yet, the archive should not be understood as synonymous with myth. As mentioned above, it is a *space of mythmaking*, the place where myth can be birthed by the archivist through the practice of consignment.

Myth does not always have to be born in an archive, but in terms of Marie Laveau and her contemporary uptake, the archive figures significantly into the equation. As Barthes has argued, myth presupposes a history already formed for the subject, locating this history in the process of signification. Baeten expounds on this, stating that “[t]he transformation of History into Nature is the primary objective of mythical signification, according to Barthes” (Baeten 113). The archontic principle is the gathering of the signs which are emptied by myth. Though the archival history of Marie Laveau is the metalanguage that is usurped by the Laveau Myth, the archive is not a static space and so myth continues to act within it.

The metalanguage offers the ‘indisputable’ knowledge on which myth makes meaning. The structure of the archive—its privileging classification by genre, its identification and naming process—contributes heavily to this process, as it offers a

homogenous narrative format which supports the claims and objectives of Barthes' articulation of myth. The multiplicity of Laveau, specifically here in terms of her placement in the archive, affects her treatment as a historical figure. Though there is the Laveau which existed in terms of material truth, legitimized by baptismal certificate and other materials of the like, there is also the Laveau which by assertion of the archons *could not have existed*. This Laveau and her power extended above the practical and material notions of Truth and entered the supernatural with her ability to provide help to people of color, enslaved and free, and to control legal and policing proceedings. The classification of this Laveau, the figure of a black woman in power in nineteenth-century New Orleans, is not accidentally among the Folkloric as her power could be regarded as what Paula Gunn Allen offers as nonordinary knowledge that does not ascribe to materiality or factuality. Like most systems of classification, the archival topo-nomology that Derrida refers to relies on a dichotomy of Dominant/Other. This is yet another normalizing tool of the archive and mythology. While the genre of Government Documents proves her tangible existence, the genre of Folklore disproves her power and influence. Due to these spatial circumstances in the archive, the space of such indisputable knowledges, Marie Laveau is denied any legitimization through the archive.

Examples of myth traveling from the archive into scholarship can be found in the previously mentioned works of Fandrich, Long, and Ward. They begin with the archive for its indisputability, utilizing their finds in one section to confirm that Laveau indeed existed and there were reports of her being a 'Voodoo Queen' long before the LWP. Yet, that is only so far as they can go. The use of Laveau documents from the Folklore



genre is present in all of these authors' works, yet because of the authority of the archive, these materials are only referred to as conjecture; any reports of Marie Laveau's power and influence is treated as exaggerated. When writing on the LWP interviews, Fandrich stresses her distrust in the interviewees for their old age and assuredly fading memory rather than a skepticism regarding the interviewers. Though Fandrich is reluctant to trust the LWP she still uses excerpts to ground her argument of Laveau as powerful. On the other hand, Long's work centers that of the LWP's and places trust in it for legitimacy, utilizing their work for reference on contested statements about Laveau's life. For example, in Long's chapter on Laveau's prison ministry, she works to pick apart fact from legend, arguing that,

Although newspaper reports of 1852, 1859, 1860, and 1870 never referred to Marie Laveau's involvement, such tales were disseminated via Henry Castellanos' *New Orleans As It Was*, Herbert Asbury's *The French Quarter*, and Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* and *The Voodoo Queen*. The Louisiana Writers' Project interviews are silent on this topic. While some informants spoke of Marie as a charitable woman, they never mentioned her attention to prisoners (Long 151).

What I intend to bring to attention here through the reading of readings of archival material is the concept which KJ Rawson refers to as archival description. This concept refers to retroactive reading of archival materials and subsequently describing them in what Rawson necessitates as a narrative format, which becomes its own form of storytelling, or here, the speech act of myth. As Rawson notes, this storytelling of records and interviews affects the meaning of the records and their subsequent reception and engagements. This retelling is a mythologization of its

own as it takes previously emptied and refilled signs and rearranges them as the archive is already a space of narrativity. Here, there is also the presence of a presupposition. Patrons of the archive use what Paula Gunn Allen refers to as the meta-myth of hierarchical knowledge and myth, specifically here the meta-myth of the undeniability of the knowledge produced to stake their own claims as undeniable. Few scholars regard the topo-nomology of the archive, and those who have written of Laveau who *do* realize the distinction of Government versus Folklore do not interrogate but accept it as is, further cementing the archive as the ‘True Authority.’

Understanding the archive and engagements with it as rhetorical acts, I turn back to the objective of authors Fandrich, Long, and Ward to uncover and recover Laveau as a legitimate historical figure. In their tireless efforts to render Laveau as legible and important to the academy, these scholars have relied on dominant knowledge to make their own claims indisputable. Though there are very few claims of a feminist framework in any work of the scholars, their move to claim Laveau as specifically a female leader and influential force in addition to their own use of varied feminist theory texts indicates otherwise. Relying on the work of predominantly white male writers and government officials, Fandrich, Long, and Ward use a fundamentally white supremacist and patriarchal basis of ‘hard knowledge’ as their anchor for the recovery of a free woman of color as opposed to interrogating the implications of recovering her within the very field and genres by which she has been marginalized and rendered illegitimate in the first place. In turn, contemporary biographies of Laveau imitate the presuppositions

of the LWP, the government of nineteenth century New Orleans, and white-run journals and newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Archival and non-archival materials get further sorted by the biographers and the subsequent treatment of these materials are based on that sorting. In each biography, we can find a mini topo-nomology of chapters. For example, Fandrich's *The Mysterious Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveaux: A Study of Powerful Female Leadership in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (2005) is structured in terms of socioeconomic and temporal contexts for the bulk of the book, but then dedicates two dichotomous chapters: "The Historical Marie Laveaux" and "The Mythical Marie Laveaux." Fandrich then comments on the politics of myth making, purely concerned with those materials of the Folklore genre. Fandrich strictly devalues myth as lesser in the order of knowledge and does not acknowledge Barthes' assertion that because of the semiological characteristics of myth, it is necessarily rooted in the same kind of historical knowledge on which Fandrich grounds her scholarship in chapter five, "The Historical Marie Laveau." Mythology and the archive have an always active, re-occurring relationship through narrativity and meaning-making. Fandrich's (along with Ward's and Long's) archival descriptions expand in their own narrativity, as Fandrich's ultimate goal is not unlike that of the archontic principle of consignment.

As these contemporary scholars, specifically Long and Fandrich, have been dedicated to hardening the line between Myth and Truth, they have offered useful insights into the Laveau myth as generated by patriarchal white supremacy and how that has influenced Marie Laveau's treatment and representation as a historical, feminist

figure. However, in their efforts to guide us away from the metalanguage of Laveau that has so successfully deemed her and her legacy as illegible, they treat all works of myth and fiction as negative. This is due to their understanding of myth, like my reading of Barthes's theorizing, as solely in relation to white, patriarchal modes of definition rather than as having multiple functions, such as those that Allen posits as a communal and empowering alternative form of knowing.

### **Contemporary Iterations and Effects of Laveau's Historico-Mythology:**

Though scholars like Fandrich, Ward, and Long stress and test the boundaries of historical and mythical, I offer here a different methodology for making sense of the vast, messy knowledge production of our critical attention. I do not intend to bolden the line between some unequivocal Truth and a more menacing falsity. Instead, I argue that the revision of the rhetoric of Laveau begin not with the process of recovery, an act of finding and discovering. This process of recovery is thoroughly embedded in those practices of classification and consignment. Here, Laveau is translated into discursive spaces that are generated by and defined in relation to dominant Western modes. Rather, reclaiming or rereading Laveau should arise from a methodology also embedded in a further blurring of those boundaries. My framework is influenced by bell hooks' idea of looking *again*, a move where those critical spaces and images in the Laveau myth are not articulated through the same white, cisheteropatriarchal canon of knowledge, but rather are imagined in a decolonized framework. This method accounts not only for how black feminine bodies are constructed on screen in relation to whiteness and in terms of white-centric mythologies, but also provokes an imaginative space where memory and

narratives of Laveau can be and in some places already are enunciated in non-normative mythologies. Therefore, rather than working to maintain or create space for Laveau in a larger tapestry of history already worked on by white hands, my effort is to read and write Laveau as a thread-cutter to that tapestry, agitating those discursive spaces. This approach provides two necessary practices; the first is identifying how and where gender, sexuality, and blackness occur as ontological symbols in the larger Laveau semiology, and secondly interrogating the generative symbol of whiteness against and by which the previous symbols are marked as Other.

The significance of these two practices lies in what bell hooks refers to and argues for as “loving blackness” (hooks 9). As hooks elaborates in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), loving blackness looks and operates differently and counter-actively to fetishization, or the Otherness of blackness as consumable, exotic, and desirable for appropriation only in context of whiteness. Instead, loving blackness as a resistance methodology necessitates the refusal and destruction of whiteness, especially as the central ontological symbol by which others are come to be defined and marked as Other. In other words, loving blackness demands the decolonized framework by which to reclaim and reread can only be constructed through the intervention and disruption of the colonized framework. Loving blackness moves beyond understanding everyone, black, white, and other non-black persons, as victims of white supremacy, which leads the girth of white scholars and activist to claim some sort of ‘sameness’ through victimization. Rather, loving blackness calls for an active accountability and responsibility by white and other non-black persons to not only identify white supremacism, but to refuse it with a desire for blackness. This blackness,

hooks underlines, is distinct from our tangible understanding of race and racializing; hooks argues, “[...] that utopian longing must be distinguished from a solidarity with blackness that is rooted in actions wherein one ceases to identify with whiteness as a symbol of victimization and powerlessness” (hooks 14).

Loving blackness also brings attention the ‘oppositional gaze’, or black female spectatorship. For hooks, a central issue that looking *again* (or in relational cases looking *back*) confronts is a repressing of the black gaze and the historical entrenchment of its punishment. The oppositional gaze which takes those multiple forms of looking again, looking back, and so forth, is first and foremost an interrogating gaze. Hooks locates this gaze as first critiquing how black bodies are used in white films, underlining the relational aspect, or how blackness is defined in relation to whiteness on the screen. She goes on to argue that black looks have been solely preoccupied with race and therefore leaves important intersections of gender criticism behind. Hooks is focused not only on the black spectator, but more specifically the black female spectator and her silence, which she posits is a response to the “cinematic negation” of black women, even when they were present on the screen. Hooks notes, “Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve---to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze” (hooks 119). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins names those stereotype and tropes of black women’s representation on screen as “controlling images,” which she argues “help justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (Collins 76). Collins emphasizes the differential treatment of black women as objects rather than subjects, wherein objectifying gazes

render them in relation to that which can be subject. Unlike white women who can occupy the role of subject and therefore be afforded a privileged agency, black women's presence, history, and motives are relationally tied and subjugated in position to white subjectivity. Within a decolonizing and feminist framework, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are not and cannot be disentangled phenomena, as hooks and Collins underscore here and I will further underscore in my analysis of the Laveau mythology and its contemporary manifestations.

*Coven*, set in 2010s New Orleans, Louisiana, centers around a white (with the exception of Queenie, played by Gabourey Sibide) coven of witches, facing multiple external threats while trying to hide their existence, such as witch hunters, religious extremists, and Marie Laveau and her clan of Voodoo practitioners. The tensions and references to past clashes arise between the heads of these respective groups, Marie Laveau, and Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange), the coven's reigning Supreme. Fiona, propelled into desperation by the signs of her aging and mortality, seeks out Laveau after learning that the 'Voodoo Queen' has access to immortality and everlasting youth. The pair's adversarial relationship begins with an exchange of power and goods, but takes a turn when the witch hunters, a patriarchal line of hitmen that dates back to the 1600s, appears as a threat to the coven. These witch hunters are seen as a much larger threat than that presented by Voodoo, and the leaders of the coven reach out to Laveau, telling her that once they are gone, the witch hunters will come after Marie and her clan. The coven calls for a type of sisterhood bond that relies on a forgetting of how the coven came into power at the expense of the black women who originally held that magic and

power. This call relies on the argument of racism as a relic of the past, an idea both rhetorically and literally projected on the screen in the form of neither white witch nor black Voodoo practitioner, but white monster. Moreover, the call also points to hooks' notions of forgetting blackness, where for black women to participate in and gain support from the coven, they must forget a history and present situation of direct and systemic racist violence.

In terms of *Coven*, Laveau is positioned as (sometimes potential) corruption towards first Fiona, then Cordelia, and finally to the entire coven of young witches. Laveau coaxes the monstrosity out of these women by being their sole contact with Voodoo, sometimes directly introducing them to spirits (Fiona's induction into a contract with Papa Legba for youth, beauty, and immortality) or handling what is deemed as the 'blackest' magic of all, the dealings of life and death (as with Cordelia, LaLaurie, the undead Confederate soldiers she uses to attack the coven).

In historico-mythology, Laveau has been positioned as a threat precisely due to her ability to appeal to a larger audience than those 'traditionally' understood as Voodoo practitioners. In particular, writers have been concerned with the number of white women at Laveau's Voodoo gatherings. In *Voodoo in New Orleans*, Tallant writes of the religion and its make up, "The only men of importance were the witch doctors [...] Women seem, too, to have made up at least eighty per cent of the cultists, and it was always the female of the white race who entered the sect" (Tallant 21). Through the focus of the participation of white women in Voodoo as a corruption through a relationship with blackness, the trope of the white woman as a victim and the black woman as a source of



negative influence and consequence is furthered. We see this corruption and the other various threats generated by pop culture renderings of Voodoo manifest in multiple forms in *Coven*. Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulson), Fiona's daughter and headmistress of the training academy for young witches, also sneaks off to consult with Marie Laveau. Cordelia has had issues with fertility and, after failed efforts with doctors, turns to witchcraft. Although Cordelia and other white characters in *Coven* often refer to control over life or death as 'dark magic', the types of 'dark magic' practiced by white witches and by black Voodoo practitioners are markedly different; in the discourses around and portrayals of bio-concerned magic, ritual is racialized in historicized and naturalized ways. Cordelia's 'dark' spell for fertility is presented as well-researched, calculated chaos. Sitting in a circle of black sand, candles, and four evenly-spaced large eggs, she and her husband make what look like minor cuts (especially in comparison to the repeated slicing and removal of organs undergone by black bodies in the season) to their hands in signs of bondage. It is important to note here that Cordelia and her husband are enacting this ritual alone and intimately. The two recite a spell in Latin, a classical language notoriously drenched in white (academic, civilized) heritage. However, the driving action is not the cutting or recitation of Latin, but it is the actual sex act that accelerates the scene as flames erupt from the black salt as their passion intensifies. Snakes are birthed from the eggs, first as adolescent but quickly reach adulthood as they entwine themselves around the lovers' bodies. The treatment of the snake in the scene is what most closely draws any comparison element, as snakes are notable signs associated with Voodoo and Laveau, as many 'accounts' and representations of her rely on the

placement of a snake around her shoulders to underscore her identity. Snakes, associated with Loas<sup>5</sup>, are used in both forms of practice in *Coven* as more of a form of accessory to signify that darkness rather than as the complicated channels between the spirit world. Even Laveau's snake in *Coven* play no important role than to hang around her neck and look menacing.

In contrast to Cordelia's calculated spell-casting, in the Pouchaut Medecine scene, a fertility spell as practiced by Laveau in *Coven*, we get imaginings while Laveau narrates the process to Cordelia. As Laveau begins her overview of the Pouchaut Medecine, drums start to play, growing louder as we see Cordelia in a red dress led by two large, nameless and shirtless black men into a circle of dancing people all dressed in white with blue, green, and gold beaded jewelry. This time, people encircle fire and, though there are many men present, not one is Cordelia's husband. In these visions, Laveau eats a guinea pepper, explained by her as a sign of intense sacrifice to the gods. Once she consumes the pepper, Laveau is dancing alone with the circle, looking up at the sky. The camera turns back to Cordelia, looking small and frightened as she watches the scene unfold around her. The two men who remain on either side of her lift her up from end to end and lay her on the ground in front of a cluster of the circle. A goat painted with symbols is brought out and Laveau grabs a short scythe. With the look of terror and anxiety still on her face, Cordelia pulls her dress above her hips. Marie, her own head drawing circles, grabs the chin of the goat and, still dancing and beating her feet to the

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<sup>5</sup>Also known as "Lwas"; refers to the guiding spirits of Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo (Long 96).

ground, slices its throat so that blood splays first on her white dress and then entirely on Cordelia's white body.

Laveau's ritual is presented as just that - ritual. The neatness and organization afforded to Cordelia's prior fertility efforts draw a stark contrast to Laveau's "Pouchaut Medecine," which is offered as tribal and spectacular. Cordelia's fear lies in that of the unknown and her fascinated imaginary voyeurism of excess, not unlike those LWP writers attending and reporting on Voodoo gatherings and ceremonies in the early twentieth century. The sensory and visual effects of the "Pouchaut Medecine" scene draw heavily from those accounts written by Tallant and other reporters attending gatherings associated with Voodoo, including dances in Congo Square. Symbols and other elements we see directly mirrored from white readings of Voodoo culture out of context are: snakes, tignons, drums, dancing, and animal sacrifice. These on-screen renderings of Voodoo present magic and power practiced by black hands as primitive and disorganized.

Looking at *Coven* through hooks' oppositional gaze offers a plethora of examples where the functional strain of historico-mythology reaches into popular culture through underlying narratives of whiteness as morality. Throughout this chapter, I have located spaces where the controlling image of the angry black woman on screen has been used to serve an investment in 'proper' and 'improper' modes of being—ideas highly entrenched within racialized notions of property. This is important to note in terms of recovery work on Laveau, as *Coven* inherits this use of Laveau from a long lineage of her portrayal as angry, vengeful, tribal, exotic, and excessive; the same lineage of work (LWP, Tallant, Saxon) that constructs the basis of academic recovery work on Laveau. In the following

chapter, I will be elaborating on the contemporary Laveau myth in print. The aforementioned texts *Voodoo Dreams* and *Dominique Laveau: Voodoo Child* will come under interrogation as places to look for the potentiality of myth.

## CHAPTER III

### LOCATING THE LAVEAU MYTH AS A SPACE OF POTENTIALITY

I still get scared. I still feel insecure, but I have a wiser acceptance of myself now- and I tell stories to inspire me. And behind me I can feel the spirit of Marie Laveau, of my grandmother, and of many others, in a rainbow of spirits black and white, telling me, telling us all: being a woman is just fine. Being a person is just fine. The power be passed down through the generations

(Rhodes, "How I Came to Write *Voodoo Dreams*").

As seen with *Coven*, contemporary iterations of the Laveau myth carry the danger of repeating those centralities of whiteness and the racializing of knowledge production. Turning back to myth as a semiological system to understand those specific exercises in *Coven*, we can note how that particular representation of Laveau relies on naturalized knowledge. In semiology, the sign is made up of the signifier (the image that represents) and the signified (that concept or understanding that image refers to). In terms of *Coven*'s Laveau, for example, there are multiple utilizations of signifiers, such as the tignon and snake. The tignon carries heavy, historically racialized meaning. In nineteenth century New Orleans, the Code Noir (1724) mandated Creole women of color wear a head wrap to cover their hair. Though this law intended to continuously relegate women of color (enslaved *and* free) to the caste of slave, the emerging fashion that evolved in resistance to the law resulted in brightly colored, multi-patterned attractions. Laveau, in both historico-mythology and pop culture mythology, appears almost entirely in a tignon.

Historians from Tallant to Fandrich mention Laveau's headwrap in description of her, and contemporary spaces like *Coven* depend on the tignon as signifier of the dark, unknown power of black women.

The tension of the contemporary myth lies in its double-potentiality; the first potentiality being the replication of semiological violences which naturalize and uphold white supremacy, and the second being a potentiality of hope, resistance, and uplift. Barthes, in his detailed, anxious sketching of the semiological system of myth, pointed towards myth as necessitating deconstruction. Early on in "Myth Today," Barthes establishes the main goal of the mythologist as learning myth, breaking it down, and identifying the driving forces. Yet, later on in that same essay, Barthes also posits another method against contemporary myth: "Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth*: and this reconstituted myth will be in fact a mythology" (Barthes 247, his emphasis). Again, it is important to keep in mind that Barthes articulates these theories through a class-focused approach and to consider Barthes' position in that white-centered hegemony of knowledge production as one of those Founding Fathers of Postructuralism. However, unbeknownst to Barthes, his argument for "mythifying myth" is useful in navigating those multiplicities of myth and in marking myth as a tool for feminist rhetorical work, especially in terms of southern black (Creolized) women.

Barthes locates literature as an especially rich scene of such mythifying practices. Concerned with the troubling of realism and myth, Barthes argues for those literary texts that move from writing *about* to an awareness of construction through writing. In other words, the text is self-aware and loosens those naturalizing concepts of 'Real.' My

analysis has been concerned with such overarching concepts and their ability to simultaneously rule over and overrule the feminist potentiality of and the drive to remember Laveau. Both of these are rooted in emotional and memory-driven archives that work to blur those spaces of consignment, those separate chapters of “The True Marie Laveaux” and “The Mythical Marie Laveaux.” There are those who rely on excess and mythology to entice their readers with semi-autobiographical, sensational narratives, which should be placed under that deconstructing lens, to locate those drives of white supremacy, fear and fetishization, that consume Laveau because of that lack of awareness in writing. This writing is generated from that first semiology of mythology. On the other hand, we have those who refuse mythology as somehow a place we can (or for that matter, should) exist without. They, similarly to Barthes, seem dedicated to breaking down that myth piece-by-piece, and locating those specific moments of trajectory from fact to myth. Writers, specifically Fandrich and often Long as well, that focus on articulating Laveau as a feminist figure tend to continuously attempt to render her as legitimate in the academic realm, without necessarily questioning why her presence may be just as troublesome as her absence, if not more so. The drive to write Laveau as Historical/Real has yet to elicit the question of what this delegation means in terms of always articulating a free black Creole woman of the nineteenth century within those same hegemonies of knowledge that place Laveau in relation to whiteness. This is the type of writing that does not hold an awareness of its semiological reliance; these are those naturalizing factors that we so often find in the mythological routes of historical narratives and archiving.

Therefore, this writing overlooks those iterations of contemporary Laveau mythologies that could offer new ways of looking, reading, imagining, and remembering Laveau as feminist and still relevant as ever to feminist rhetorical scholarship about, by, and for black women, and specifically useful for enhancing feminist dialogue among Creole and Cajun black and non-black women. I argue that those seeking to recover Marie Laveau as historical and legitimate have passed over inaccurate works of memory and imagination for the sake of placing Laveau on some academic, esteemed pedestal of the Real—again, those methods of deconstructing and dissecting myth from history. Because of this unwavering commitment, Fandrich, Long, and Ward do not offer potential future handlings of Laveau, and even turn a blind eye to the ever-increasing phenomena of her trajectory. Fandrich's chapter, "The Mythical Marie Laveaux," reaches to Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* while Long stretches to the contemporary of the late twentieth century. Long summarizes Jewell Parker Rhodes' novel, *Voodoo Dreams* (1993), as such: "Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* is a historical bodice-ripper oozing gratuitous sex and violence. All of these authors rely on the popular conception of the Laveau Legend, with which they have sometimes taken great liberties" (Long xxxv).

Extremely important limitations can be found in these historically-and-factually-oriented projects, specifically in terms of goals and outcomes of recovery rooted in those semiologies. First, as I have stated previously, we face this goal of legitimization through that establishment of Laveau within some abstract, academic notion of knowledge and fact. What, exactly, is the usefulness of this articulation of Laveau, other than as some point of claim for primarily white women academics? Further, what does this mean in terms of those continuous generations of the Laveau myth that we see even today which scholars



on Laveau deem as unimportant simply because they dis-identify with those factual legitimization practices that favor methods that centralize memory and experience? Such rhetorical moves can be found in those mythifying spaces, where the author(s) has (have) troubled and robbed those semiological systems of the Laveau myth, in order to create their own third-chain system that in turns fills those signifiers with notions of hope, empowerment, and critical attention. I start with *Voodoo Dreams* as contemporary scholars have made conscious decisions to dismiss Rhodes' work as simply perpetuating mythologies, without attention to how she may be troubling them and introducing her own re-reading and looking again.

Though Barthes' theorizing of myth as a semiological system is helpful in understanding the technical and methodological basis of mythology, his treatment of myth as solely a tool of the bourgeois leaves limited understandings of myth's potentiality for resistance, refusal, and (re)articulation. Rather, Dash and hooks position myth as a mode for transformative work that relies on collective memory and redefinition. Hooks refers Victor Slosky's "defamiliarization", and upon elaboration, provides a framework within which we find much of the same work done by that project of looking again. She argues, "[...] in our efforts to decolonize and liberate ourselves as black people, or as any oppressed group globally, we have to redefine our history, and our mythic history as well" (Dash 31). Rhodes' work can be seen as another form of redefinition, of continuing mythology as heritage and matriarchal lineages of knowledge, memory, and power.

Myth as a lineage of memory and being, as a form of recovery, resistance, and existence as I point to in my introduction, is a potentiality made clear by Paula Gunn Allen's work on myth. Allen also interrogates the relationship of myth and ritual, a

running theme of conversation for mythologists. Arguing that current misinterpretations and lacking definitions of the relationship between myth and ritual are due to that entrenchment in Greek and Roman cultures, she instead positions the two as based in “visionary experience” (107). Allen then looks at the visionary figure, in relation to the visionary experience. The writer connects the figure of the visionary figure in mythic reality to the figures of the healer and prophet. In her analysis of the visionary figure particularly in Native myth, Allen centers community and responsibility in sharing and working from a visionary experience. Her link of the visionary to the prophet actively undermines the temporal framing of myth as only of the past by suggesting that it is not only a current, ongoing process but also a process of looking to the future. Returning to her naming of myth as a kind of story, Allen writes, “Myth is a story of a vision; it is a presentation of that vision told in terms of the vision’s symbols, characters, chronology, and import. It is a vehicle of transmission, of sharing, of renewal and as such plays an integral part in the ongoing psychic life of a people” (116). For Allen, myth as articulated in alternative modes of thinking and living functions as a form of empowerment rooted in communality and collectivity.

What Allen’s articulation of myth as uplift can offer us when reading Marie Laveau in all of her representations and iterations is a potentiality of recovery through remembering, recalling, and revising. This lens offers a fruitful framework to read iterations of the Laveau myth previously dismissed by scholarly uptakes, such as those by Fandrich and Long. Allen’s myth grants an opportunity to pick up works like *Voodoo Dreams* (1993) by Jewell Parker Rhodes and interrogate how, through the author’s critique of the archive as authority through her narrative construction, may be resisting

those investments in intellectual property as entrenched in whiteness. Further, Allen's theory on myth as uplift assists in locating tangible implications of myth as a method of trauma survival and negotiation of lived experience for black women in the myth of Marie Laveau.

Rhodes' 1993 *Voodoo Dreams* acts as an introductory text to the Marie Laveau mystery series she later wrote (*Voodoo Season* (2005), *Moon* (2008), and *Hurricane* (2011)). Much like other writers who have taken up Laveau, her interest is marked as starting through some brief flicker of Laveau's presence—a reference in a cookbook, Rhodes offers on her website. Also similar to those other authors, Rhodes writes of some felt kinship with Marie Laveau, intertwining her personal identity with that of the Laveau she was writing and constructing. Rhodes' agency as rhetorician shines through her self-aware writing, one where her liberation is quite literally bound up with her project of the mythical Marie: "Marie's story became the story I told myself to keep going" ("How I Came to Write *Voodoo Dreams*" 2017). Unlike those previous historians and rhetors who seek to recover Laveau but find themselves up against those barriers of absence and lack in terms of some evident Truth, I assert that Rhodes' work is a refusal to find some tangible confirmation of power. Rhodes is not concerned with *knowing* Laveau, but *remembering* her, and what such utterance of memory can offer in terms of resistance and survival. In addition, Rhodes repeatedly circles back to *longing* as an emotional knowledge that can be powerful and fear-inducing in itself, both in terms of whiteness and blackness. Furthermore, Rhodes instills this longing as a driving force behind her writing, using her positionality and lived experience as a black woman to imagine Marie as a powerful, matriarchal figure that bears the ability to uplift specifically through their collective identities. Rhodes'

rhetorical motives are personal yet have larger implications for black women who inhabit those same places of longing.

Rhodes tackles those who critique her novel (and treat historical fiction) as lacking authenticity:

The notion that my book is somehow or other more satisfying to some people because they see it as rooted in history I find bemusing, and the answer finally is that history is very much fictional. I mean, we can talk about how certain events happened, but people's perceptions and detailing of that history sometimes result in a work of fiction or work of particular sensibilities. So, while *Voodoo Dreams* is an historical novel, it should be underscored that it is a novel, an imaginative lie that tells a great deal of truth about what it might have been like to be Marie Laveau in the nineteenth century, and this might be more authentic in some ways than so-called histories (Interview par 9).

Rhodes rejects the ranking of institutionalized knowledge and material truth, which elicits the meta-myth per Allen, that dismissive regard for alternative modes of knowing and being. Rather, she criticizes the placement of History and its discipline as organic.

Rhodes' work is a prime example of that literary scene of 'mythifying myth' which Barthes locates as a potential resistance against myth. Rhodes writes with an awareness that Laveau already comes along with a semiological, mythological system that she is by default writing in when she conjures the name 'Marie Laveau' onto the page. Her mythifying rhetorical moves can be found in her 'robbing' those signifiers in that mythological system and looking back at them in the context of black women, African lineage, and alternatives modes of knowledge (experiential, emotional). We can see such a move in Rhodes' strategic

decision to imagine the relationship between Laveau and Damballah, the Voodoo loa. Damballah's form, the serpent, has held an active role as signifier in the Marie Laveau myth. In fact, I have *yet* to come across a representation of Laveau or of the Laveau-figure where a snake has not appeared; in *Coven*, Marie's snake appears along the same demands as her tignon: only when partaking in Voodoo ritual. In these excessive renderings of Laveau, the snake bears no name, no purpose other than that of eliciting fear and suspense. As *Coven* relies on the underlying semiology of snakes in the mythology of Laveau, Rhodes locates it as a point of revision, of looking again.

*Voodoo Dreams*, unlike the other texts I interrogate regarding the contemporary Laveau mythology, is set in Marie Laveau's historically lived setting of nineteenth-century New Orleans. Rhodes frames her work through the writing of a white abolitionist journalist, Louis DeLavier, with each section beginning with an excerpt from his journal, written as an interview with Marie while on her deathbed. The first section, "The Middle," begins with a scene from 1822, with our protagonist in the midst of a Voodoo ceremony with her male counterpart, John. In this short section, Marie murders John in front of her followers as reparations for the violence he inflicted on her, her mother, and grandmother. The excerpts offer reasoning for this placement of events, with our fictional Marie noting her murder of John as catalyst for all of the other events in her life: "John's death became a vortex. My life propelled me to murder him, and my life was propelled by his death. Everything for me spirals outward from this center. Lies, pain, and loss haunt the future as well as the past" (*Voodoo Dreams* 413). Already, Rhodes troubles trauma as being simply of the past. Instead, she points to trauma as an

inheritance and a figuring factor of the present and future. The rest of the novel follows a fairly consistent chronological order marked by Marie's journey of learning more about the Laveau matriarchal legacy of Voodoo, power, and resilience, returning to Marie as child residing in the socially isolated Bayou Teche with her grandmother. At this point, Marie has no knowledge of such a legacy, as her grandmother converted to Christianity shortly before moving them to the bayou, and only speaks to Marie of the spirits and saints of Catholicism. However, Marie longs for more than what Catholicism can offer a young, orphaned black girl and her dreams (or visions) hint to her a much more powerful and empowering legacy. As Marie matures and is visited by John in the woods outside of her home, her grandmother, Grandmere, comes to terms with her granddaughter's vulnerability and her inability to protect her from the same influences that lead to her daughter's (Marie's mother) death. Grandmere resolves to take Marie to New Orleans in order to find her granddaughter a husband and to secure her safety from John, who exploits Voodoo for personal gain after being sold into slavery (the indirect cause of Marie's mother's death), as well as fear-driven violence against Voodoo and black women (the direct cause).

Yet, the night of Marie's marriage to her grandmother-approved husband, Jacques Paris (who carries the name of the historical Marie's first husband), Marie follows the call of her name to a Voodoo ceremony. Possessed by the spirit of her mother, Marie sleeps with John, brimming not only with her desire for the unknown but her mother's desire for the known power and vitality she once held. Marie's initiation is dual in Voodoo and womanhood: "John lifted her up, her skirt cascading over his arms. The ceremony was ending. One initiation was complete" (*Voodoo Dreams* 124). Shortly

after, once Marie's mother's spirit has left her body, John grows cold towards her. Marie's journey is marked by events of violence, as John's impatience, greed, and exploitation manifests in rape and beatings when Marie is unable or unwilling to meet his expectations and resists her mother's spiritual possession, a presence and familiarity she once had desired fervently. However, as Marie progresses and learns more about her heritage and legacy as a 'Voodoo Priestess,' she is able to accept, cultivate, and share Voodoo as a communal mode of survival and resistance that follows her great-grandmother, Membe's purpose as given by Damballah. As scholar Tara T. Green posits, "Her steps in maturation are marked by moments when she gains significant knowledge; much of that knowledge is gained through acts of resistance" (Green 297). Rhode's imagining of Laveau operates through a different type of access to knowledge and meaning, one rooted in memory and a conceptualization of power as inherited through trauma and resistance. Rather than being rendered a victim of circumstance and subjectification, here Laveau is figured as a radical, productive, and reactive spectator.

Imagining Laveau as what hooks calls a 'Black Female Spectator' towards her own life is powerful in that it allows for a shift in discussion from being subjectified to reading oneself as subject. Marie is always looking, seeing, and observing and it is through her willingness to do so that she is able to resist narratives of victimization or of 'being lost' to memory. Hooks writes of the oppositional gaze, "Given the context of class exploitation, and racist and sexist domination, it has only been through resistance, struggle, readings, and looking "against the grain," that black women have been able to value out process of looking enough to publicly name it" (hooks 126). The importance of Marie's sight to Rhodes' counter-narrativization is salient in numerous places in the text,

from her ability to see herself when she was born to the more literal act of looking at and reading faces and rooms. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie gains knowledge, power, and direction through a constant gaze. In a ceremony the night before she turns nineteen, Marie enters the water and is given a vision by Damballah, a vision of her ancestors, flanked by her mother and grandmother, on a ship to Africa. Damballah tells her, “These are all *who you are* [...] Mixed blood. But your blood flows because of and through me, Damballah. The god of your ancestors. We sail towards Africa. Home” (Rhodes 306, my emphasis). It is through sight that Marie becomes self-actualized and is able to see herself in terms of a lineage of power and potentiality.

Rhodes achieves this through a framing of Marie’s story in West African tradition and as a spiritual journey of self-determinism. The historical reality of Voodoo as a site of resistance for enslaved and free black women is a driving theme throughout Rhodes’ novel. That personal notion of longing that Rhodes finds in Laveau can be connected to the complex spatiotemporal and cultural dynamics of nineteenth-century New Orleans, where longing for a connection to Africa was also a driving force behind practicing Voodoo and other forms of resistance rooted in African tradition and knowledge. Green offers an elaboration of Rhodes’ “connection between spirituality and historical memory” (Green 287) by looking at the parallels between Marie the granddaughter and Membe, her great-grandmother, who are (like every woman in their lineage) called upon by Damballah to be leaders and to restore/retain faith in the African-based Voodoo. Green emphasizes a memory of lineage and an exchange of legacy in reading the relationships between Marie and her mother (dead), grandmother (dying), and great-grandmother (dead). Of Marie’s vision of her own birth, Green writes,



Marie's astonishing ability to see herself born, sets the foundation for the rest of the novel. Her confusion as to why she is able to see the moment when her life begins and her grandmother's role in protecting her from death begins is pivotal in understanding the significance of Marie and Grandmère's relationship. (Green 288)

Green goes on to highlight how the relationship between Grandmère and Marie is one of a dynamic temporality, specifically when it comes to looking. Rather than simply serving as a link to some static past, Grandmère's role encourages a gaze towards a future of being and self-definition through her recounts of family history rooted in refusal and resistance. However, as Green highlights, Marie's inheritance of this legacy is not without its own obligations and constrictions. Precisely due to her family history of resistance and survival, Marie, much like her grandmother, also inherits obligation to Damballah and her community. Rhodes' rendering of Laveau's and Damballah's relationship is inherited as a counter-myth to that of the snake-signifier in that first Laveau mythology. Rhodes refuses the trope of the snake as a mere accessory to Voodoo or as some primitive point of worship and instead complicates those images of the snake by re-articulating it in terms of West African knowledge of spiritual tradition.

In *Voodoo Dreams*, Marie and Louis DeLavier hold a dialogue that offers those mistreatments and misconceptions of Voodoo as primitive; Rhodes has Marie confront and answer the white male journalist whose creed has constructed those images of Voodoo in their ethnographic journalistic endeavors. In an interview about the novel, Rhodes confirms her intentions with the role of Louis DeLavier, our framing narrator, as a reference to the bulk of historical rhetoric about Laveau being generated by those white male local journalists of papers such

as *The Picayune*, and further those writers employed under the Federal Writers' Project. Rhodes even points to the circular hypocrisy emanating from those journalists citing their own or colleagues' work (see Tallant for reference). Years after their first meeting, which cemented in Louis Delavier's mind the image of Marie the beautiful, naive, and exotic girl for his saving, a further perspective of the process of fetishization so inscribe in the historico-mythology of Laveau, he is startled to find her matured and aware. He is visibly disappointed to see her 'meddling' in Voodoo and no longer virginal. As DeLavier's disappointment is through his inability to somehow 'save' her, Marie's disappointment and frustration is borne out of her longing to be heard and understood. The same tension that resonates here points to a longstanding tension of hypervisibility and invisibility, rendered through those same processes of fear and fetishization. To DeLavier, the shattered image of Marie Laveau potential as *to be saved* is replaced with the threat of no longer being able to serve his purpose as white savior through conversion. Rhodes complicates DeLavier's (and further white scholar's) authority and investment in a type of knowledge production when she writes their next meeting, where she imagines a coming-to-consciousness for Marie. This 'coming to' occurs in another instance of refusal, here a refusal to believe or accept what is told to her about her. Hooks writes of disbelief, "Failure to exercise the power of disbelief made it difficult for women to reject prevailing notions of power and envision new perspectives" (hooks 93). Marie's choice and act of disbelief is a move to exercise power by distinguishing between different types of knowledge. A compelling part of discerning between these different knowledges for Laveau was the process of generation, more specifically generation *by whom*.

At the beginning of this second meeting, Marie is hopeful, tinged by the familiarity between the two, a shared trauma which she realizes was only really a trauma for one of them. After his claim of great, reliable literacy on the subject of Voodoo, she reveals to Louis that she is the Voodoo Queen . As DeLavier is quick to delegate Voodoo to primitivity, exploitation, and criminalization, Laveau meditates on those writings on Voodoo he cites:

Marie shuddered and closed her eyes. She was affronted by Louis' words. Part of her recognized he was weak, unable to abide by his own convictions. Part of her knew, too, he was being condescending. Were there any writings on Voodoo written by blacks? She didn't think so. It was illegal for slaves to read and write [...] She knew in New Orleans free coloreds had schools, but she'd never heard of any books written by coloreds. And if they were written who would publish them? (*Voodoo Dreams* 240).

By highlighting that historical reality of silencing black rhetoric and authorship, Rhodes points indirectly to her own position as a black woman writing about a black woman and directly to the futility of frustration with Laveau's actual historical lack.

Rhodes' recurring usage of Damballah and the snake figure is also rooted in location, as we learn that Marie's Grandmere relocated the two to Bayou Teche after Grandmere's conversion to Christianity. Bayou Teche, about 140 miles inland from New Orleans, holds serpentine significance in Indigenous folklore. In Chitimacha legend, a ten-mile-long snake is attributed to making the massive indent that would become the bayou. Though Grandmere has formally renounced Voodoo in favor of the protection that a claim to Christianity offers in a white-dominated space, she still chooses a place that maintains a connection to serpents. Grandmere's longing manifests itself in the knowledge and experience of black women: her initial refusals to impart upon Marie the

story of her mother and great-grandmother, and the further refusal to impart upon Marie the knowledge of Voodoo, is driven by Grandmere's longing for the safety of her granddaughter. However, she realizes her desire for Marie's security is fraught, due to Marie's indelible inheritance of black womanhood in the nineteenth century.

Grandmere's drive to forget Voodoo notably occurs after the death of her daughter, Marie the third's mother.

Grandmere tells Marie the stories of her great-grandmother and mother (in that specific order) when Marie is pregnant with John's child and she is on her deathbed. First, Grandmere speaks of Membe, called by Damballah to submit to slavery so she can travel to the New World to reignite and remind others in the African diaspora of their faith. Grandmere speaks of her father, her slave master, entering Membe's cabin and recalls her mother's persistent songs of Damballah. Grandmere also calls to memory her husband Sachwaw, a Muskogean American Indian, who was murdered by her father. She then tells Marie how her father raped her, offering her thought that he had always planned to use her in this way. Escaping with her daughter, Grandmere eventually collapses from exhaustion and is found by Nettie, whom she sought as a partner to continue the legacy of her mother. Aware of the danger facing a free woman of color (a "Voodooiene," no less), Grandmere encourages Marie the Second's relationship with John for the sake of protection. Much like her initial refusal to tell Marie the Third her lineage of power and responsibility, this is a grave miscalculation. We then learn that Marie's mother was murdered while leading a ceremony in Cathedral Square, a predominately white, Christian territory. Whites, incited by fear and rage, beat Marie the Second, whipping her against a tree. Grandmere's repeated

trauma, escalating to the point of witnessing her own daughter's brutalization and murder, demotivates her from fulfilling her mother's legacy for the sake of survival.

As Marie has inherited a legacy of power and responsibility, she has also inherited trauma and memory rooted in pain. More so, Marie is aware of her positioning as a site of consumption and sacrifice for the sake of Damballah and restored faith of her people. Rhodes' Laveau seeks love and comfort through relational being while simultaneously handling the demands of her constituents, who seek her power through any means necessary. Exhausted by those crowds who continuously call her name and demand physical touch as well as being a point of exoticism and romanticism for those such as Louis DeLavie, Rhodes offers us an image of Laveau as a much more complex point of imagining. Specifically, her repeated turns to Laveau's concurrent reluctance and desire as not necessarily opposed to each other, allows for reading Laveau in a dynamic, and importantly, relevant lens. Through these rhetorical moves, the remembering of Laveau within Afro-centric contexts and modes of resistance offers Laveau as a hero that signifies resistance, uplift, and shared memory.

Laveau as hero offers another rich engagement with her ever-proliferating mythology. According to Joseph Campbell's elaboration of the hero myth, Rhodes' imagination of Laveau fulfills multiple aspects of that archetype, particularly the first and fourth types, as outlined in Kenneth Ghee's chapter on the cultural and mythical significance of black superheroes. The types, respectively the reluctant (or willing superhero) called to power and the dutiful 'role hero', the latter is most often ignited by the relational lineage of Laveau—a need to protect and maintain what little she has. The memory of Laveau's lineage of power does not end with those mythifying representations of just her but extend to imagine

Laveau's power as reaching into the twenty-first century. Moreover, the positioning of Laveau as a hero further entrenches her mythological presence, while troubling normative temporal restrictions. Marie Laveau as hero points to a dynamic temporality, as the hero is activated in present and futurist narratives.

Dynamic temporality is crucial to mythology as a form of cultural memory and uplift because it refuses a strict chrono-normative ordering of knowledge and experience. In other words, the potentiality of mythology lies in its ability to speak of the past in terms of the present and/or future. What a focus on mythology in terms of feminist recovery work on figures like Laveau offers us is a negotiation of that relegation to the past and the constrictions it generates through maintaining such distances. Marie as Hero is an imaginative recovery work in that it offers an articulation of Laveau as a lineage of power rather than a static anomaly. In these methods of recovering Laveau through a type of memory and critical imagination, Laveau is no longer articulated as lost or distant; instead Laveau becomes situated in an ongoing narrative of resistance wherein the past, present, and future generations keep looking at and to one another. Laveau as Hero:

The comic series *Dominique Laveau: Voodoo Child* (2012) by Selwyn Seyfu Hinds and Denys Cowan is one such direct imagination of Marie the Hero, as the narrative follows the great-granddaughter of Marie Laveau, Dominique Laveau, as she learns she is next in line to the Voodoo throne. Much like Rhodes' Marie, Dominique's mother is dead (though in childbirth and not violence for Voodoo) and has been sheltered from Voodoo by her mother's cousin, Giselle, to protect Dominique from her aunt and Voodoo leader Serafine, who ordered she "get rid of it. Or risk Ogun's wrath falling on us all" (No. 2). Unlike Grandmere, Giselle does not survive long enough to prepare her,

to impart upon Dominique her legacy. Instead, Dominique learns from the loas and from visiting her great-grandmother in the spiritual realm. Dominique's self-realization comes to her under premise of the murders of both her cousin and aunt, not entirely unlike Rhodes' Marie, whose rise is signaled in relation to the declining health and eventual death of Grandmere. The cyclical, cross-temporal nature of relationships, blood, and destiny, however, are not the only similarities in these two iterations of Laveau rendered in an oppositional gaze.

In *Dominique Laveau*, Marie takes on a role similar to that of Membe, in that she is marked as the originating point of a larger legacy and destiny for Laveau women. Yet, most notably, the Laveau iteration of legacy here extends beyond those ties of blood kinship to embrace a larger identity kinship, such as the one that drives authors to Laveau in the first place. When Dominique undergoes tests by the loas to measure her ability to rule and exercise power, the test of her compassion put her in contact with Tasha, a young, homeless black girl living on the streets with her brother, Tayshawn, after Hurricane Katrina. After her ascension to the Voodoo throne, Dominique finds Tasha and Tayshawn among the wreckage of an attack and decides to raise them as her own, within the Voodoo court as counsel and as protection. After six years of reign and mortally wounded by her jealous cousin, Jacqueline, whose desire of the Voodoo throne motivates her to kill her own mother. As Dominique dies in Tasha's arms, she reassures Tasha of their bond as mother and daughter and, in the tradition of Laveau mythology, successfully ensures the continuation of legacy: "You are my *daughter* in every way that matters, love. And there are things you need to know. I have strength enough for that" (No. 7, emphasis in original). In both *Voodoo Dreams* and *Dominique Laveau*, a ritual of

inheritance is entirely in the act of giving knowledge. Tasha, like Dominique before her, and Marie in *Voodoo Dreams*, is initiated into a lineage of power by having access to a certain type of knowing. All three are early on subjected to a fate in which they resist and survive through the ability to look back and ahead, to actively disbelieve and *gaze back*, not only at those eyes which deem them static, dead, and lost, but at the resulting image of themselves as acting in relation to whiteness and white-generated knowledge. Rather, they are now able to self-define and wrestle with the co-constructive qualities of their past and future.

However, the role of looking and sight in *Dominique Laveau* differs notably from that in *Voodoo Dreams*. As a comic book series, what *Dominique Laveau* offers in terms of practicing the oppositional gaze is that it lets us literally see a critical imagination of Laveau as an ongoing figuration of refusal and resistance. Indeed, Dominique as a character has access to other forms of sight and seeing with voodoo, like Marie in *Voodoo Dreams*, but the visions themselves are *rendered to us* rather than us having read them simply in written word. By doing so, *Dominique Laveau* sidesteps a certain imagistic constraint in both functional strains of mythology by forcing its reader to look again by narrating through actual images on the page. By utilizing a graphic genre as medium, Hinds and Cowan also confront the growing technological aspect of knowledge as property and its racialized matrices of power by inhabiting a genre often associated with whiteness. Further, as a comic book, *Dominique Laveau* re-appropriates the naturalizing phenomenon of historico-mythology by firmly situating Laveau, voodoo, and southern black womanhood within a dynamic contemporary discursive process that lacks the presupposition of loss for a more productive, resistant, and ongoing becoming.



### ***Voodoo Dreams and Dominique Laveau Post-Katrina:***

Published in 1993, Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* obviously has no direct or underlying reference to Hurricane Katrina. However, I interrogate her text to remove any understandings of the subjugation of southern black women during and post-Katrina as exceptional. Rather, Rhodes' method and the summation of her work gesture towards that long tradition of rendering southern black women as invisible and hyper-visible. Rhodes' work also illustrates the Laveau Myth's lengthening relationship with and navigation of this tradition. *Voodoo Dreams* confronts the lacking archival presence of Laveau and its curatorial generation with the character of Louis DeLavie, a direct reference to Laveau's entry method into the archive through the pens of white male journalists. Rhodes tackles the invisibility of Marie Laveau while also confronting the attempted erasure of herself and her work through the publishing process, highlighting how the invisibility of black women manifests in decidedly political and rhetorical modes. Further, Rhodes underlines Laveau's simultaneous hyper-visibility, as also generated by characters DeLavie and Doctor John, who at various points in the novel mark Laveau and 'Voodoos' in general as needing subdued, managed, and oftentimes disposed of. In *Voodoo Dreams*, Rhodes' Laveau come face to face with both of these exactions of power, and in her greater destiny indebted to Membe, must combat their violent, isolating, and marginalizing effects through the dissemination of Voodoo and its communal, Afro-centric objectives.

In contrast, *Dominique Laveau*, with its first issue published in 2012, not only takes place post-Katrina, but its racialized socioeconomic aftermath become a significant driving point in the overall narrative of the series. *Dominique Laveau* centralizes the lasting effects

of Katrina as the great-great-granddaughter of Marie takes in and raises two black children rendered homeless orphans after the natural disaster. Unlike *Coven*, the series highlights that lack of attention to the lived realities of post-Katrina black modes of existence and survival by the ruling elite in the series, drawing connections to historically entrenched race relations of profit and exploitation in New Orleans. However, unlike Zoe Bensons strangely out-of-context voiceover before she kills someone out of revenge, Dominique Laveau actually speaks to communal modes of survival and care. I argue that Dominique's actions are not only an inheritance of Voodoo as a community and identity-based belief system, but also a nod to southern black feminist modes of resistance.

The fact that *Dominique Laveau* takes place three months post-Katrina, in addition to Dominique's choice to adopt and raise a homeless black orphaned girl to be her successor, underscores that potentiality I have asserted we can find in the mythology of Laveau as a site of memory and decolonized knowledges. The larger implications of representations such as these can be found in bell hooks' concept of the black female spectator, who not only must navigate with a critical eye those few representations of black womanhood in cultural text while also reading for places of hope, empowerment, and resistance. There is a need for recovery and writing to point to those social, cultural, tangible realities of existence while offering new attention to methods and exactly what work we're looking at and referring to. These projects trouble those drives to place Laveau in relation to the same knowledge productions that have erased and delegitimized her as a figure of any importance. Rather, imagining the future possibility of Laveau allows for more tangible, localized applications. In terms of *Dominique Laveau's* setting, Voodoo is not only rendered in a contemporary form, which in turn refuses relegation to

that of some primitive, distant place. Yet, in addition, those power structures so entangled with Voodoo from the nineteenth-century, are traced as still evident, effecting and affecting black women, and more specifically black women practitioners. In scenes that harken back to quadroon balls, *Dominique Laveau* concerns itself with underlining those remaining manifestations of power, such as money, status, gender, religion, and sexual desire/taboo.

Lack of representation expands to multiple genres of rendering and allow then for multiple types of remembering-recovery *not* articulated in Eurocentric modes. As Kenneth Ghee notes of such lack, “[U]nlike in European American (White) culture, there is a dearth of serious culture bound hero archetypes available to the youth in black culture that truly “represents” the affirming African-centered values of African American (Black) culture” (Ghee 227). Positing that the majority of comic superheroes are rendering through and by Eurocentrism, Ghee argues that the few black superheroes within this lens are stripped of any importance related to their racial identity. Instead, he argues for those black superheroes which are “explicitly “Black” and cultural bound” - one that refuses an erasure or forgetting of African roots (230). Moreover, both *Voodoo Dreams* and *Dominique Laveau* engender Marie Laveau as hero and, most importantly as human—a characteristic Ghee argues is overwhelmingly denied to superheroes. *Voodoo Dreams* and *Dominique Laveau* can be seen as exercises of the other functionalities of oppositional gazing that hooks writes of. As she argues, oppositional gazing and black female spectatorship is not only resistant, interrogative, and critical of representations of black women, but also creative and inventive in establishing a space for radical black female

subjectivity which imagines the cultural generative as a location of possibility. Hooks writes,

It is this critical practice that enables production of feminist film theory [and, I argue in addition, feminist readings of text] that theorizes black female spectatorship. Looking back and looking black, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future. (hooks 131)

Hooks' definition of the oppositional gaze echoes the resistance and re-imaginative potentiality of cultural myth that Allen focuses on. In my next chapter, the conclusion, I will elaborate on how these non-normative knowledges of the present and imaginations of the future have hopeful implications in and ties to the contemporary situation of Black Creole and Cajun feminist issues and modes of resistance in Post-Katrina New Orleans.

My focus on Laveau as a rich site for this kind of interpretive work rests in her deeper cultural significance as a point of tension in localized Creole and Cajun communities while simultaneously being a point of repeated uptake by those outside of these communities. Refusal to talk about Laveau in communities like my own, those small and dispersed white Cajun communities, speak to *not messing with that stuff*, marking Laveau's presence and influence as threat to the meta-language of white [Christian] social morality that as such necessitates mediation. In terms of our current political and popular feminist dialogues where 'witchiness' and magic have become revisited points for empowerment and identification, I underline the vulnerability of Laveau and other figures that are associated with nonwhite, non-normative modes of knowing as being repeatedly placed in reference to and in service of whiteness. I have addressed this tension in my chapter on *American Horror Story: Coven*. Where white

‘witchiness’ and ‘magic’ take center stage as protagonists in a horror television show, Voodoo and literal black magic serves as threat to vindicate the ‘proper’ coven. Myth as it functions through a discourse of white supremacy still enacts through techniques of fear and fetishization and an investment in whiteness as property. As I have stated throughout this thesis, I am particularly interested in whiteness as *intellectual property*. In other words, I have been focused on interrogating how certain types of knowing and certain spaces of myth-making become privileged over others due to their close proximity to whiteness.

## CHAPTER IV

### GAZING FORWARD

The author obviously assumes that being “on relief” automatically qualifies one for the discriminating take of recognizing and collecting material, and endows one with the knowledge and skill to evaluate and winnow it (Zora Neale Hurston, “Review: *Voodoo in New Orleans*,” 1947).

Throughout this thesis, I have worked to illustrate the double-potentiality of the Laveau myth and its multiple functions. I argue that uptake of Marie Laveau necessitates a regard and study of her mythological dimensions if we are to successfully locate and interrogate how Laveau has and continues to be a sort of matriarch in a lineage of southern black women rendered invisible and hyper-visible. However, my larger argument and the hope I gesture toward in this thesis is a reading of the second potentiality of the Laveau myth as another form of lineage: a lineage of southern black feminist praxis of revision that is rooted in resistance, communality, and self-definition. My focus on the Laveau archive as a rich site for this kind of interpretive work rests in her deeper cultural significance as a point of tension in localized Creole and Cajun communities while simultaneously being a point of repeated uptake by those outside of these communities. Refusal to talk about Laveau in communities like my own, those small and dispersed white Cajun communities, speak to *not messing with that stuff*, marking Laveau’s presence and influence as threat to the meta-language of white supremac

These are the multiple potentialities of reading and studying Laveau through a discourse of Myth: 1) a critical interrogation of what it means to *know* Laveau; 2) a discussion of *in whose language* and *for whose sake* do we seek to know Laveau; and 3) an address as to how our positions within an academic institution that overwhelmingly privileges white-generated structures of knowledge and myth production affect our approach to Laveau as a matter of ‘recovery’ or as a ‘truth-seeking’ process. What these potentialities offer us is a possibility of decentering the discourse around Laveau as generated by white supremacist mythologies of knowledge and knowing and an opportunity to lend a critical gaze, a “looking back and looking black” methodology that accounts for other systems of myth already active; systems that instead act as lineages of remembrance, of experience, of lived reality (hooks 9). For what is at stake in reading, researching, and writing Laveau lies not in the confirmation of her reality or existence. Rather, the stakes lie in how, when we ask why and how Laveau *is not* or *should be* remembered, acknowledged, or accounted for, we are really asking why Laveau has not been rendered legible by white institutionalized forms of collecting, organizing, and disseminating knowledge. The stakes are, that while we ask these questions, we dismiss black writers, artists, filmmakers, and activists that have *already done this work, have asked these questions and answered for themselves*. Again, as I have asked in my introduction, why do we desire so greatly to recover Laveau within academic discourse, as discourse that necessarily dismisses and opposes her existence, not solely as a free woman of color in nineteenth-century New Orleans, but *because* of that which she has always signified, which is other ways of knowing, existing, and relating to the world that does not begin with the academy?

### **Gazing Forward:**

I will practice looking one more time. This practice, however, is a gaze forward *and* reflexively in terms of this project. This thesis is part of a larger critical survey of the myth of Marie Laveau. The materials I have written about here make up only a portion of the wider, globalizing stretch of the Laveau myth. There are more novels, more comics, more on-screen utilizations of Laveau. There are musicals, songs, spiritual guidebooks, and more that rely on Laveau as a generative site for imagining, reading and (re)reading, and reiterating. They illustrate the themes I have highlighted here as well as offer other running components of the myth and ideal of Marie Laveau. Some subjects I want to cover in my future work on this project are the centrality of faith in articulating Laveau, the image of Laveau as healer, and the notion of Laveau as a unifying power in the complex religious and cultural negotiations of nineteenth-century New Orleans. I want to expand on Laveau as a site of affective identification, a both problematic and useful current in writing about Marie Laveau.

I turn back to the affective and emotional here because above all I believe what has driven me to write about Laveau is in fact the ways she elicits emotional responses over a century after her death. Throughout this thesis, I have encountered texts (literary, archival, visual) that are deeply rooted in emotion, be it anger, longing, fear, or loving. I think back to the emotionally tense turn the discussion with my mother took when I told her about my project, her strained dismissal. *We don't talk about her* was and is far from empty to me, signaling an anger and anxiety that are in themselves functioning in myth. I also think forward to to more activist, pedagogical, and scholarly work rooted in



parsing through these emotions, and, like WWVA and the alternative Laveau mythology, how this sort of work cultivates possibility.

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